# “WE ARE HERE BECAUSE YOU WERE THERE”: KINSHIP AND LOSS IN 20TH- AND 21ST-CENTURY KOREAN AMERICAN NARRATIVES

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

*"We are Here Because You were There": Kinship and Loss in 20th- and 21st-Century Korean American Narratives* analyzes the significance of trauma and attachment in representations of family within contemporary Korean American literature and films. Situating these texts in relation to Asian American histories of warfare, migration, and adoption, my project asks how contemporary Korean American authors and filmmakers represent the possibility of constructing genealogies in the face of trauma and abandonment. To answer this question, I analyze late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century Korean American fiction and documentary films by authors Grace M. Cho, Nora Okja Keller, Chang-rae Lee, Alexander Chee and filmmaker Deann Borshay Liem that historicize the Korean diaspora through its generational models. These narratives feature absent mothers, motherless children, adopted children, and families who are haunted by psychic and material losses. I argue that scholars must contextualize the formation of the Korean American family through histories of war that involve the US nation-state to understand the potential for non-biological kinship relations produced by conditions of militarization.

The project is organized into four chapters and an introduction that provides the historical and theoretical contexts for the chapters that follow. Chapter one puts forward a comparative discussion of two documentary films by Deann Borshay Liem, *First Person Plural* (2000) and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* (2010), to argue that Borshay Liem constructs a queer kinship of Korean and Korean American women within the diaspora. For the second chapter I frame the mother-daughter relationship within Nora Okja Keller's novel *Comfort Woman* (1997) through the mother's queer desires that originate from relationships with the other Korean comfort women at the Japanese military camp during World War II. Chapter three analyzes the queer

relationships that exist at the margins of the family narrative within Chang-rae Lee's novel, *A Gesture Life* (1999), to argue that queerness is integral to the institutions responsible for gendered and sexual violence in the diaspora. For the last chapter I read Alexander Chee's *Edinburgh* (2001) through a queer of color critique, tracing the effects of sexual trauma throughout the narrative to show that the gay, biracial protagonist's lack of concern about his race is an unavoidable result of his childhood experiences with racialized desires and the construction of the child victim.

The project draws from and contributes to the fields of feminist and queer studies, Asian American literary studies, transnational adoption studies, and American studies. My analysis of representations of Korean American intergenerational relations reformulates two sites of inquiry that have shaped the field of Asian American studies: one, the significance of the family; and two, the relative invisibility of the figure of the transnational adoptee. While Asian American scholars have called for a shift away from an exclusive focus on intergenerational questions in approaches to Asian American literary studies, I revisit questions of generational models to foreground the transnational sexual and gendered labor required for the formation of US families involving the Korean military war bride and the transnational Korean adoptee after 1945. I use queer and feminist theories of kinship to examine the nonbiological and alternative kinships threaded throughout the narratives in these texts, but which are often overlooked in favor of the normative family relations also present. For those reasons, my project calls for more approaches in which biological reproduction is not prioritized within discussions of lineage, genealogies, and diasporic intimacies.

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# INTRODUCTION

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*Colonized subject. War refugee. Military bride. Immigrant mother.*

*War orphan. Transnational adoptee.*

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In "Kimchi Blues" (2012), a nonfiction essay about the recent loss of her mother, Grace M. Cho reflects on how her mother's life experiences were inextricable from the conditions of militarization characteristic of the Korean diaspora in the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Born under Japanese colonialism and nine years before the start of the Korean War, Cho's mother came of age during a period marked by conflict involving the end of World War II, US militarization, and the Korean War. During the Korean War, Cho's mother, like countless others, experienced the devastation of her home and the resultant displacement.[1] Following the war, with few options available, she worked as a bar hostess at an American military base where she met Grace's father, a US merchant marine. Grace's mother moved to the US as one of many allowed to immigrate under the War Brides Act of 1945 and then settled in Oakville, Washington, where Grace spent her childhood. "Kimchi Blues" details how, over the course of her lifetime, Cho's mother inhabited multiple subject positions: colonized subject, war refugee, military bride, and finally, immigrant mother. Each formation emerged from particular conditions created by the shifting terrain of political and military conflicts on Korean soil, and the essay narrates how a single person can embody each of the lived experiences of those circumstances. Taking a skeptical view of US justifications for the war and military occupation in Korea as a necessary project to secure independence for a nation and its people, "Kimchi

[1] According to scholars of the Korean War, this conflict produced an incredibly high civilian death toll, with three million dead and another two million reported missing.

Blues" resists the logics of a progressive narrative by chronicling how a woman's life was shaped by the inevitable overlap of these subject formations. The story of Cho's mother, and those like her, reminds us that lived experiences of militarized conditions do not recede into the horizon of time when the conflict supposedly ends.

Situating "Kimchi Blues" within histories of warfare and migration, Cho uses her mother's lived experiences to contemplate the nature of attachment within a diaspora rife with loss and displacement. Cho's family, for instance, emerged from the conditions of US camptowns. Her mother as a military bride and Cho's own mixed race status and American upbringing signal how US militarization during the Cold War era helped create successive generations of Koreans living in the US whose arrivals are not tied to the 1965 Immigration Act, which is typically understood as inaugurating large-scale migration from Asian nations to the US. As Cho expresses in the essay, and in her scholarship elsewhere, military brides like her mother "were the first link in the chain of Korean migration," such that "By the 1980s, a significant Korean American community had been established, thanks to taboo-breakers like my mother" (Cho 55).[2] Although the Korean American community to which Cho refers includes wives of American men, some of whom sponsored Korean family members, as well as mixed race children like Cho herself, "Kimchi Blues" also acknowledges that biological families built from US militarization are not the only forms of migration and kinship within the Korean diaspora. The war orphan and the transnational adoptee are two figures also produced from the conditions of US military camptowns and ongoing US military occupation, both of whom

[2] In her essay, "Moved by War: Migration, Diaspora, and the Korean War," Ji-Yeon Yuh details how military bride migrations helped establish a Korean population in the United States, first through marriage to US soldiers and then through family-based immigration sponsorship. According to Yuh, "Since 1950, more than 100,000 Korean military brides have immigrated to the United States" and through chain migration, "it is estimated that military brides are responsible (directly and indirectly) for bringing forty to fifty percent of all Korean immigrants since 1965" (278).

significantly contribute to the number of Koreans in the United States.[3] Cho is careful to point out the presence of these figures in her own experiences: "Most of the Koreans who later settled into my hometown were adoptees. As an adult, I learned that the practice of international adoption from Korea was a way of dealing with the country's war orphan" (Cho 57). In response to the increased number of transnational Korean adopted children in Cho's hometown, her mother used kimchi to create meaningful connections with other Koreans forced to deal with the loss of family and home.

Acknowledging kinship that extends beyond biological or familial relations, Cho believes that her mother "offered kimchi as a salve for [the adopted children's] broken hearts because she understood that the everyday acts of eating and cooking preserved a connection to a people and places that one left behind" (Cho 57). As the editors of *Eating Asian America* insist, "Specifically, when we think about the historical circumstances in which Asian American foods were consumed and produced, we must consider the effects of wars and imperialism on the racialized and often racist contexts of Asian American bodies" (Ku, Manalansan, Mannur 7). The familiar Korean food is meant to represent her mother's steadfast connection to a place and a people, as well as her dedication to survive hardships created by distance or destruction. For example, Cho describes how difficult it was for her mother to acquire the proper food supplies to make kimchi in the US during the 1970s. But because the food was one of the few things that could soothe her homesickness and cultural isolation, her mother would go to great lengths to procure the necessary ingredients, including driving 90 miles, one way, to Seattle for cabbage and foraging the land for various ingredients (Cho 55-6). Her mother's love for kimchi, however,

[3] According to data presented in Eleana J. Kim's *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*, the number of Korean children adopted overseas annually between 1953-2008 is 162, 665. Although not all Korean children adopted overseas were sent to the US, E. Kim notes that, as of 2008, "Korean adoptees comprise an estimated 10 percent of the total Korean American population" (20-1).

was not just based in nostalgia, but sustenance. During the Korean War, Cho's mother, at nine-years-old and separated from her family, rationed out a large jar of kimchi to keep from starving. Eating only a small portion each day, her mother was kept alive by the single jar of kimchi for three seasons (Cho 54).

While this example works as a tribute to endurance in the face of many losses, Cho's essay about her mother's passion for kimchi also underscores the capacity for food to construct diasporic intimacies. Around the time Cho was in first grade, a local family, the Summers, adopted two young, abandoned Korean siblings. For these adoptees, Cho's mother acted as a translator and ambassador. After one particular visit during which Cho's mother deduced why Kay and her little brother were upset over fermenting cabbage the children mistook for kimchi preparations, Cho describes how "It was the first time I had ever witnessed my mother cry" (Cho 57). Although Cho's mother and the adopted children experience displacement under different circumstances, the children's experiences of confusion and disorientation resonate deeply with her mother because the adopted children were also products of militarization. As Cho reasons, "Nothing could change the fact that Kay and Jason had been suddenly plucked from home and dropped in a strange land, with a new family who could neither speak their language nor understand their culture, but my mother decided that never again would they have to go without kimchi" (57). I interpret the mother's insistence to feed Kay and Jason not as a reification of their supposed shared nationality, but as representative of their similar circumstances of loss and dislocation within the diaspora. The alternative kinship model consisting of Cho's mother, a former colonized subject and military bride, and the Korean adopted children, is just one example of a genealogy built from conditions of US militarization, in addition to biological

lineage and procreation. These are the forms of kinship that I explore within my dissertation chapters.

*"We are Here Because You were There": Kinship and Loss in 20th- and 21st-century Korean American Narratives* argues that the conditions of militarization that help produce US nuclear family formations, such as Cho's Korean American family and American families with transnational adoptees, also create nonbiological and queer kinship relations within the Korean diaspora. In this dissertation, I examine 20th- and 21st-century Korean American fiction and documentary films that feature intergenerational relationships between parents and children—including immigrant mothers and American daughters, motherless children, adopted children, and families haunted by psychic and material losses. These texts historicize the Korean diaspora in terms of generations, using the characters' personal experiences to move across and between national boundaries, and bring past sociopolitical events to bear on the narratives' present moments. With consideration to Asian American histories of warfare, migration, and adoption, my project asks how contemporary Korean American authors and filmmakers represent the possibility of constructing genealogies in the face of trauma and abandonment. This dissertation thus reads the selected texts' alternative kinship models as registering the fractures and formations created by militarization and US involvement in Asian wars, revealing the inextricable nature of the queer and normative intimacies that shape the Korean diaspora. I contend that scholars of Asian American studies and transnational Korean adoption studies must contextualize the formation of the Korean American family and American families with transnational Korean adoptees through histories of war that involve the US nation-state to understand the potential for non-biological kinship relations produced by conditions of militarization.

The figures at the center of my project—the Korean comfort woman, the mixed race child, and the transnational adoptee—have been studied as relatively individual figures in scholarship in Asian American studies, Asian studies, and transnational Korean adoption studies. My project is the first sustained examination of contemporary Korean American authors and filmmakers' representations of these figures as a way to imagine alternative kinship models within histories of war, colonialism, migration, and transnational Korean adoption. Drawing on feminist and queer theories on kinship and diaspora, my project offers an original account of how genealogies are created and sustained within the Korean diaspora when kinship is unburdened by procreative logics and lineage based on reproduction.

Feminist scholarship on these figures has incisively analyzed how colonialism, warfare, and US militarization have direct effects on experiences of gender and sexuality. After decades of silence by both Japanese and Korean governments and the continued refusal to acknowledge the brutal truths regarding the World War II Japanese military comfort camps and the forced conscription of Korean women into military sexual slavery, feminist scholars showed how the figure of the sexualized Korean woman interrupts dominant nationalist narratives about Korea and the US following World War II.[4] Scholarship on the Korean comfort woman regards her to be important subject who must be considered when addressing the impact of war, issues of reparations, and the possibility of justice during the late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-centuries.

Since the 1990s, the effort to make Korean comfort women a part of public discussions about sexual violence and war crimes has fueled Korean women's activism. In the introduction

[4] In addition to the scholarship cited throughout this chapter, significant feminist texts also include: Katharine H.S. Moon's *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in Korea-U.S. Relations* (Columbia University Press, 1998) and Ji-Yeon Yuh's *Beyond the Shadow of the Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America* (NYU Press, 2002), which Cho references in "Kimchi Blues."

to the 1997 special issue of *positions*, Chungmoo Choi cites the 1991 lawsuit, which involved Kim Hak-sun, the first comfort woman to speak publicly, as the pivotal event to break the silence on the history of Korean comfort women internationally (v-vi). On December 6, 1991, thirty-five members of the Association of Korean Victims, including three former Korean comfort women, filed suit against the Japanese government, in the Tokyo District Court, using legal channels to control the narrative and lay direct responsibility at the national level (Choi "Nationalism" 13).[5] Japan, however, is not the only nation-state being held accountable for the suppression of this particular history of violence. According to Hyun Sook Kim, after the lawsuit became public and more than one hundred women in South Korea came forward to register as former comfort women with the South Korean government, "the most remarkable and historically unprecedented aspect of the comfort women 'movement' is that the women survivors speak out by asserting their multivocal identities: they state that they are elders, women, poor, and subjects who were subordinated by both imperial/colonial and national governments because of their gender and ethnicity" (74). The comfort woman issue, positioned at the intersections of three different imperial/colonial and national governments, cannot be contained to the Pacific War, spatially or temporally, or understood as unfortunate circumstance of war.[6] In the decades following WWII, Korea's post-war nation-building initiatives controlled public discourse around the Korean comfort women topic. As Hyunah Yang's research on South Korean newspaper coverage on

[5] In December 2015, Japan and the Republic of Korea reached a formal agreement about comfort women: Japan issued an apology and agreed to pay $8.8 million to help support surviving comfort women. In return, Korea agreed to refrain from criticizing Japan for its war crimes and forced sexual conscription and to work towards having the statue removed in from the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The bronze statue, an expression of commemoration and protest, was installed in 2011 by local Seoul artists and activists and features a young girl who sits facing the embassy (Steven Borowiec, *Al Jazeera*, January 29, 2017).

[6] For an anthropological analysis of Korean comfort women that contextualizes the military sexual conscription of Korean women "partly as one important example of the massive exploitation of laborers, men and women, under Japanese colonial rule" (xii), see C. Sarah Soh's *The Comfort Woman: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan.* Soh also analyzes the sexual violence enacted on Korean women not as specific to war, but as a part of structural inequalities within patriarchal societies which target poor women in particular.

Korean Military Comfort Women from 1991-1993 reveals, until the 1980s, because of patriarchal nationalism, "there was virtually no research, investigation, or discussion on the subject [of Korean comfort women] in South Korea" (123). In relation to Japan, following liberation, Yang argues that "Korean identity is built only upon victimhood," and the gendered effects of that subject position directly influenced public opinion on Korean comfort women (129). First, this lead to silencing the surviving comfort women through a collective, national shame, and second, by reframing history through claims that Korean comfort women's bodies should be regarded as virginal sacrifices for the Japanese empire and ultimately, for the Korean nation (Yang 131-2). Similarly, in their discussion of gender and nationalism, Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi argue that it's not coincidental that the South Korean government dismantled its socialist movements while under the influence of the US. This included the Korean women's labor movement that had actively advocated for women's liberation and education as necessary for a strong nation throughout the first-half of the twentieth century ("Introduction" 2-3).

I have provided a brief review of the scholarship on Korean comfort woman published at the end of the twentieth-century to contextualize significant feminist approaches regarding Korean women within Korean histories of colonialism and militarization that involve the US. As E. Kim and Choi note, "Twentieth-century Korea is a palimpsest of multiple layers of Japanese colonialism and neo-imperialist domination, especially by U.S. hegemony, which superimposed its systems on the political and social infrastructures of Japanese colonial rule" ("Introduction" 3). These foundational works—*the comfort women: colonialism, war, and sex* (1997), a special issue of *positions*; and *Dangerous Woman: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (1998), an edited collection of essays—feature Korean and Korean American scholars whose research helped to establish the geopolitical, transnational conditions of the Korean diaspora. The varied

approaches, including historical and literary and ethnographic, link the US to Korea during the Cold War era in complex and asymmetric arrangements that include discrete events like the Korean War and military occupation, but also more affective relations, such as interracial marriage and US soldiers fathering children with Korean women. These edited collections also created opportunities for further studies of US-Korea relations, post-1945 in the areas of Asian American studies and American studies.[7]

My project is grounded in these feminist approaches and situates the generational relationships featured within contemporary Korean American narratives and films against the gendered and sexual histories of Korean women throughout the twentieth century. And similar to Cho's mother in "Kimchi Blues," the subjects within my selected narratives often inhabit more than one subject position simultaneously. This prevents specific figures within the texts, such as the colonized subject or the Korean comfort woman, from fading into the past when that character, for instance, immigrates to the US or becomes a wife and mother. The conditions of militarization characteristic of the Korean diaspora are brought into the contemporary Korean American narratives and films through individual character's experiences, but also, significantly, through the formations of the families that are central to texts and their plots.

[7] Significant scholarship that followed includes furthered discussions of Korean comfort women, such as the 2003 issue of *Journal for Asian American Studies*, edited by Kandice Chuh. For a discussion on US Cold War policies of integration, as well as containment, see Christina Klein's influential *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961.* For discussions that reframe dominant US Cold War ideological and policy narratives, see Grace M. Cho's *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* and Jodi Kim's *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War.* The essays within *Mothering in East Asian Communities: Politics and Practices*, edited by Patti Duncan and Gina Wong, present a broader discussion of gender and sexuality under conditions of US militarization in Asian nations during the second half of the twentieth century, through the act of mothering and kinship. See *the unending Korean War*, a 2015 issue of *positions* edited by Christine Hong and Henry Em for a discussion of the Korean War and its biopolitical afterlife. For a discussion of 1990s redress culture within late-capitalism, late-colonial geopolitics, see Lisa Yoneyama's *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes.* While some of these texts include discussions of transnational adoption, this list does not include the increasing scholarship in transnational Korean adoption studies, which this chapter discusses later.

Within Asian American studies more broadly, the generational narrative about Asian immigrant parents and their American children is familiar. Within Asian American literary studies, it is understood as a story of familial love forced to stretch across distances and cultures as familial relationships negotiate (seemingly conflicting) generational desires and identifications. On the whole, scholars of Asian American literatures and cultures have analyzed how fictional Asian immigrant families represent (to varying degrees) Asian Americans' lived cultural and political experiences in the United States.[8] The focus on intergenerational models, specifically the experiences within and across generations within a family, is one approach that examines how the twentieth-century Asian American family (actual and fictional alike) is intimately linked to US social histories and cultural practices. These studies offer significant contributions to analyses of Asian American experiences of immigration, assimilation, education, and citizenship. However, I contend that scholarship involving narratives about the Asian immigrant family does not always focus on the conditions under which the family was formed, despite the critiques about how the US state disciplines subjects on the basis of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. As Grace M. Cho argues, when scholars use the 1965 Immigration Act as the framework to understand the legal and political conditions that created Korean American families, not only does that obscure specific militaristic circumstances under

[8] Key examples of significant works in the field of Asian American studies include Elaine H. Kim's *Asian American Literature* (1982) and Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* (1996). Given the scale of topics and analyses of each text, the main points of discussion extend beyond the Asian immigrant family in fiction, but arguably, the Asian immigrant family still plays a key role in some of the chapters' most often-cited arguments from both texts. Aihwa Ong's *Flexible Citizenship* (1999) is an anthropological study of emigrating families in the era of globalization. Later works that more directly analyze intergenerational relations and Asian American family formation include erin Khuê Ninh's *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (2011) and Juliana Chang's *Inhuman Citizenship: Traumatic Enjoyment and Asian American Literature* (2012). Susan Koshy's 2013 article, "Neoliberal Family Matters" uses Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* to discuss how the contemporary Asian immigrant family is not necessarily the site of productive citizenship, but alienation as a "result of uneven gendered and generational labor of diasporic social reproduction" (352).

which certain families came to be, but also presumes that those whose migration helped create such families, did so voluntarily (*Haunting* 12; 23-5).

The representations of Korean American families and American families with transnational Korean adoptees, within my selected films and literary texts, certainly depict the challenges of living as Asian American subjects in the United States. But by also tracing the geopolitical conditions that facilitated migrations between Korea and the US, my analyses are not invested in a singular or celebratory narrative of Asian immigration and assimilation during the second-half of the twentieth-century. These Asian diasporic families, to borrow A.J. Yumi Lee's phrasing, are distinct from the familiar Asian immigrant family because of the role US militarization played in shaping familial intimacies. Using the Korean War to help establish an earlier timeline for understanding family formation in the US, Lee explains:

> Whereas the immigrant family has been hyper-visible as the primary framework for understanding post-1965 Asian America, the Asian diasporic family formations that preceded and indeed prefigured this model, including marriages between American soldiers and their Asian wives and adoptive American families and their Asian daughters and sons, have been both invisible and incomprehensible according to our dominant narratives of the immigrant and the refugee. (A. Lee 141)

Following Lee's formulation of the Asian diasporic family, I analyze how, despite heteronormative features that suggest otherwise, the Korean American family and American families with transnational Korean adoptees are instable formations. Within the texts discussed in my dissertation, the conditions of war and US militarization produce non-biological kinship relations, but are often overlooked in favor of normative family narratives.

To underscore the effects of US military occupation in Asian countries on Asians' migrations to the US, the title of the dissertation borrows the postcolonial adage "we are here because you were there." As the editors of the "Southeast Asian American Studies Special Issue" of *positions* assert, the phrase is generally understood as characterizing "The particular presence of wartime refugees and migrants in the United States…as well as their changing connections to their so-called homelands" (Ngô, Nguyen, and Lam 672). Like other Asian groups migrating to and settling in the US due to warfare and occupation in their origin countries, Koreans' experiences with the US state and American culture began before they even left home. Consequently, scholars of diasporic studies and Asian American studies have used these conditions of US military imperialism throughout the twentieth century to frame questions of US nationalism and its role in constructing Asian migrants' subject and community formations. My approach focuses on intergenerational models to examine how Cold War, US state-sanctioned policies influenced the formation of Korean American families and alternative kinships both over "there" in Korea, as well as "here" in the United States.

A sustained analysis of the transnational effects of US militarization on kinship within contemporary Korean American narratives is not meant to minimize or conceal the fact that Korean diasporic subjects, upon establishing roots in the US, become Asian settlers who benefit from US colonialism. The growing discussions of Asian settler colonialism by scholars in Asian American studies and American Indian studies strive to address how Asian American communities uphold settler ideologies and practices through claims of national belonging. In the context of Hawai'i, for instance, Native Hawaiian scholar Haunani-Kay Trask has argued that when Asian American communities refer to themselves as "local," they are trying to ideologically and politically position themselves outside the American colonial system ("Settlers

of Color" 46). But Asian immigrants' settlement in the US does not exist within, as Candace Fujikane criticizes, a "third space that exempts [settlers of color] from colonial responsibilities" ("Introduction 10). As Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd explains in *The Transit of Empire*, "As the administrative colonialisms of European empires dismantled after World War II, the deep settler and arrivant colonialisms continued unabated within the post- and neocolonial geographies of the global South that are now reconfigured to bear the brunt of the economic, environmental, and militaristic needs of the global North" (xix). Asian immigrant and refugee groups' experiences, including being colonized in their countries of origin and struggles against anti-Asian racism in the US, do not negate their complicity in the ongoing US colonization of indigenous peoples. Or, as Trask succinctly puts it: "For our Native people, Asian success proves to be but the latest elaboration of foreign hegemony" ("Settlers of Color" 47).

Even though many of the diasporic figures I discuss are physically disconnected from Korea because of political instability due to Japanese colonialism and the Korean War, these circumstances do not create exceptions within ongoing US colonial practices. As Fujikane asserts, "Asian settlers may not be able to identify with the Asian homelands many of them have never seen, but that does not change their condition in Hawai'i: in this colonized location, they are settlers in another's homeland" ("Introduction" 21). Although this project does not directly analyze settler colonialism, tracing the effects of US militarization on kinship within the Korean diaspora has implications for the role of Asian diasporic family formations within critiques of colonialism involving multiple nations.[9]

[9] SooJin Pate's work, *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption* (2014), is a groundbreaking study of the orphan and the adoptee as distinct but interconnected figures within the Korean diaspora, starting in 1945. Pate argues that the Americanization of the Korean child began long before said child arrives to the US, and that the creation of the orphan in Korea is a imperial project further preventing the Korean nation from true decolonization.

I have chosen to focus on questions of race, gender, and sexuality within contemporary Korean American narratives to examine how the conditions of US militarization have discursive and material effects on the formation of kinships. The Asian American family during the second half of the twentieth century, for example, is a historically specific—and fraught—kinship model, as scholars of citizenship and racial formation have established.[10] For women like Cho's mother, their settlement in the US marks a significant shift in immigration allowances following World War II. In contrast with the first half of the twentieth century, when Asian immigrants were predominantly male and single, between 1945 and 1965, Ji-Yeon Yuh explains, the emphasis shifted to family reunification, ensuring pathways to immigration and citizenship despite existing exclusions based on race and nation of origin ("Moved by War" 279). According to A.J. Yumi Lee, postwar exceptions made for certain Asian women and children, through policies such as the Military War Bride Act of 1945 and the 1953 Refugees Relief Act, not only reversed previous gender restrictions for Asian immigration, but underscored how the American nuclear family has functioned as a site by which Asian bodies are made fit for inclusion into the US nation (135-6). Building on Yuh and Lee's points, within my selected texts, I consider how US nationalist ideas of race, gender, and sexuality are translated through the Asian diasporic family for Korean, white, and mixed race family members with uneven results.

Queer studies of kinship and heteronormativity have been useful for my study of the Korean diasporic family. For one, because these formations are not just built on the logics of normative sexuality, but also contain interracial pairings, queer critiques of the Korean diasporic family need to address the racialization of heteronormativity. As Cathy J. Cohen argues in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," it's not enough for queer critiques to renounce

[10] In addition to this project's discussion of Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* (1996) and Christina Klein's *Cold War Orientalism* (2003), see also Yen Le Espiritu's *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love* (1997) and Mae M. Ngai's *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (2004).

heteronormativity; instead, queer analysis needs to recognize "that 'nonnormative' procreation patterns and family structures of people who are labeled heterosexual have also been used to regulate and exclude *them*" (447-8). Although the aforementioned immigration allowances deemed Korean women and children exceptional, it was only on the basis that the sexual and gender norms that structure the nuclear family would manage its racial differences. As my chapters discuss further, for the family members of color, submitting to the normative demands of the Korean diasporic family comes at a cost. For another, queer of color critique's attention to "the ways in which identities of race, class, and/or gender either enhance or mute the marginalization of queers, on the one hand, and the powers of heterosexuals, on the other" helps me bring to the fore my texts and films' often overlooked representations of nonbiological and queer kinships produced from US militarization (Cohen 448). Additionally, I offer new contributions to the study of queer kinship by adding a transnational approach, which acknowledges the subjects who experience racial, gender, and sexual norms through more than one national framework. The possibility of transnational queer kinships also allows for new social relations between those who are physically distant, but remain connected through shared geopolitical conditions and histories. The families I analyze in this dissertation are "queer" not because they involve lesbian or gay characters (although some do), but because their representations of racial misalignments and nonbiological kinship relations unsettle normative models of the nuclear family.

Just as A.J. Yumi Lee established an earlier timeline for the formation of Korean American families in the US by moving the mark from 1965 to the 1950s, my project argues that Asian diasporic family formations are ongoing, extending past the end of the Cold War era through the continuation of two state-sanctioned practices: transnational Korean adoption and

US military occupation on the 38th parallel in Korea.[11] As such, Asian bodies within predominantly white American families, historically and concurrently, are not inherently disruptive to the heteronormative and patriarchal practices of family formation. Transnational adoption practices, for instance, allow those individuals who might be denied inclusion in the US nation-state to enjoy legibility through an Americanized nuclear family. In *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961,* Christina Klein argues that following WWII, the American nuclear family is built on capitalist logics of containment *and* integration that mirror the Cold War ideologies that shaped anti-communist relationships between the US and Asian nations. Based on her research of US cultural representations that depict the Cold War era as a "sentimental project of family formation," Klein articulates the profound, hegemonic impact such ideologies have on bodies, domestically and abroad: "These families [linked to adoption] created an avenue through which Americans excluded from other discourses of nationhood could find ways to identify with the nation as it undertook its world-ordering projects of containing communism and expanding American influence" (*Cold War* 159). Although Klein does not engage queer theories of kinship or diaspora, her argument is foundational to understanding how the fostering and adoption of Asian babies by American families helped to normalize a new "hybrid, multiracial, multinational family" built on "bonds of choice (at least on the part of the American parents), rather than by biology" (*Cold War* 146).

Building on Klein's cultural analysis of the American nuclear family, David L. Eng asserts that twenty-first century transnational adoption practices are a form of queer liberalism, enabling "the confluence of the political and economic spheres that forms the basis for the liberal

[11] According to Ji-Yeon Yuh's 2005 article, "more than 100,000 Korean military brides have immigrated to the United States" since 1950 and that number will continue to grow as long as the US military remains on the Korean peninsula (278). The scholars of *the unending Korean War*, a 2015 issue of *positions* edited by Christine Hong and Henry Em, argue that the perpetual US military presence on the DMZ has biopolitical effects that have yet to be fully addressed or explored by scholarship in Asian American studies and American studies.

inclusion of particular gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects petitioning for rights and recognition before the law" (*Feeling of Kinship* 3). While Eng aptly identifies the troubling appeals to normativity and acceptance within queer liberalism, I recognize his claim as also noting how nuclear family formations in the US continue to exist within a larger, traumatic history built on exclusionary practices and multigenerational violence. Ann Cvetkovich credits Eng for articulating how "diasporic social formations do not necessarily challenge nationalisms; in some cases, cultural nationalisms are articulated through the regulation of sexuality and gender in the name of cultural purity and reproduction" (*Archive of Feelings* 121). The multiracial, intergenerational relationships represented in the project are often characterized by conflict, but I interpret this feature as a reminder that the Korean diasporic family is formed from traumatic conditions that do not fade to the past when figures are granted conditional inclusion in the US nation.

While Asian American scholars have called for a shift away from an exclusive focus on intergenerational questions in approaches to Asian American literary studies, my project revisits questions of generational models to trace how desires and attachments form within and against Asian diasporic family formations. Whereas scholarship in Asian American studies has well established lines of literary analysis for intergenerational conflicts between immigrant Asian mothers and their Americanized daughters, I would argue that the Asian diasporic family – with its geopolitical, transnational characteristics and adoption practices – requires approaches that can more properly situate diasporic subjects (in this case, Koreans) within their multinational and *extra*national experiences. Therefore, thinking within *and* beyond nation(s) is particularly necessary in creating space for nonbiological and queer relations and experiences. According to JeeYeun Lee, "Queer historical narratives critique heterosexist definitions of community and

nation, which rely on simplistic forms of identity politics. Diasporic queers cannot inscribe themselves onto an imagined or real homeland without radically changing its terms, since many forms of nationalism are constructed around assumptions of normative heterosexuality" (J. Lee 193). Within narratives of return, queer diasporas radically change the terms by offering the potential for new social relations not built from nationalist, heteronormative discourses. For this to be possible, Ann Cvetkovich argues for a queer approach to trauma. She asserts,

> Queer theory has taught us to revalue gay and lesbian practices as paradigmatic instances of nonnormative sexualities; it can also help illuminate how immigration produces queer, or nonnormative, versions of national identity and the nation. Migration can traumatize national identity, producing dislocation from or loss of an original home or nation. But if one adopts a queer and depathologizing approach to trauma and refuses the normal as a real or ideal state, the trauma of immigration need not be 'healed' by a return to the 'natural' nation of origin or assimilation into a new one. (*Archive of Feelings* 121)

The project's focus on intimate formations in the Korean diaspora through queer and transnational feminist theories critiques the heterosexist framing that Korea is a nation in need of saving and the American nuclear family is a solution that aligns with the US role as savior.

In *Immigrant Acts* (1996), Lisa Lowe argues that to read Asian American literatures exclusively in terms of "generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians" (*Immigrant Acts* 63). Instead, Lowe encourages readers to consider not just the "'vertical' generational model of culture" (which includes the relations between parents and children, but also between the different waves of immigration) but the "horizontal"

models as well. For Lowe, a poignant example of a horizontal relationship comes from Diana Chang's short story, "The Oriental Contingent." The two women in the short story are convinced that the other person is more "authentically" Chinese and as a result, resist an open discussion about their individual connections to Asian American culture. The story undermines the idea of an "authentic" Asian American identity by revealing that one of the two women is adopted and has white parents, rather than parents of Chinese descent (*Immigrant Acts* 65). Interestingly, Lowe does not discuss the story's treatment of transnational adoption, although non-biological kinship and adoption are necessary elements to her argument against essentialism. This omission is surprising because Lowe's call to move away from a "fixed" Asian American identity toward Asian American cultural practices could certainly include transnational adoption, as well as the adoptee as one whose sense of self is informed by such practices. Lowe's lack of discussion about transnational adoption speaks to the ways in which reading practices within Asian American studies—even in some of the field's most powerful and nuanced accounts—have not always considered adoptees as Asian American subjects or transnational adoption as a significant Asian American cultural practice.

Arguably, adoption practices have gained increasing attention—scholarly and otherwise—within the past 20 years. *Seeds from a Silent Tree: An Anthology by Korean Adoptees* (1997) and *Outsiders Within*: *Writing on Transracial Adoption* (2006) argued persuasively that disciplinary discussions about transnational adoption had excluded adoptees' voices. These anthologies contribute to a growing collection of works produced by adult adoptees about their identities and experiences, which my first chapter discusses in more depth through an analysis of Deann Borshay Liem's documentary films, *First Person Plural* (2000) and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* (2010). In addition to the first-person narratives about

transnational Korean adoption, scholarship in Asian American studies has addressed the subject as a standalone topic, as well as a part of larger Asian American experiences of immigration and assimilation.[12]

My approach to transnational adoption within the Korean diaspora is through questions of genealogical methods, incorporating adoption practices into a larger process of kinship formation that began in the 1950s and continues into the twenty-first century. This aligns with Lisa Lowe's explanation that genealogical study does not "accept given categories or concepts as fixed or constant, but rather takes as its work the inquiry into how those categories become established as given, and with what effects" (*Intimacies* 3). My project frames subject formation within the Korean diaspora to be a series of overlapping and constitutive processes involving the management of racial, gender, and sexual differences. The transnational adoptee, for instance, has been discussed as a subject whose formation is constituted multiple times over: through structural inequalities that prevent birth mothers from raising their own children in Korea; through the official paperwork that concretizes the selling and purchasing of Asian bodies; or through the US airport arrival scene in which the adoptee is physically and psychically incorporated into a new American family.

The overlapping formations of the "war orphan" and "adoptee," I argue, cause tensions, disruptions, and misalignments that cannot be fully ignored or disciplined into submission. In "The Kinship of Violence," Hosu Kim and Grace M. Cho trace the origins of transnational Korean adoption back to the US military camptowns established before, during, and following

[12] Significant scholarship that addresses adoption as a standalone topic includes Sara Dorow's *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*; Eleana J. Kim's *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*; Mark C. Jerng's *Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging*; Catherine Ceniza Choy's *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America*; Arissa Oh's *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption*; and Kim Park Nelson's *Invisible Asians: Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism.*

the Korean War. Transnational adoption practices in Korea, they argue, served as a "solution" to help rebuild a nation devastated by war and manage the increasing numbers of mixed race children born to Korean mothers and fathered by US soldiers. Within this context, H. Kim and Cho reframe the "'war orphan' not as the child who has lost her parents to war, but more broadly, as the child who was born out of the social and material conditions of U.S. militarization in Korean and South Korean nationalism" ("Kinship" 32). Similarly, the "war baby," as discussed by Laura Kina and Wei Ming Dariotis, is one whose parentage also emerges from conditions from US militarization within Asian nations for the second-half of the twentieth century. They cite US immigration policy for its constitutive function in concretizing the formation, "Amerasian;" in particular, Public Law 97-359, which provided "children of U.S. citizens (usually the fathers) who can prove they were born in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea, or Thailand after December 31, 1950 and before October 22, 1982" preferential treatment in granting L-1 and general student visas for residency in the United States ("Miscegenating Discourses" 12). The genealogical methods in these scholarly works align with Lisa Lowe's assertion that "violence leaves a trace, which returns and unsettles the apparent closure of liberal politics, society, and culture that establish the universal" (*Intimacies* 6). Rather than imagine that the Korean American family and the American family with transnational adoptees have insular histories of formation because one is built through reproductive practices and the other is constructed through nonbiological kinship practices, "*We Are Here because You Were There*" argues that both types of family formation are representative of normative practices under neoliberal nation-states. The queer kinships also produced by conditions of US militarization help reveal the excess, the overlap, and the fragmentation embedded in the Asian diasporic family formations.

**Summary of Chapters**

Chapter one compares two documentary films by Deann Borshay Liem, *First Personal Plural* (2000) and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* (2010). These two films are widely considered examples of return narratives, in which the American-based adoptee finds resolution in Korea. I posit, however, that the scenes involving families within the first documentary demonstrate how transnational adoption narratives are not inherently uni-directional or easily contained within nationalist frameworks. Borshay Liem's Korean family, the Kangs, are unable to accept Borshay Liem back into their family because they, like the director's American family, adhere to the US imperialist, liberal narrative that adoptees are always better off adopted than raised in Korea. I argue that Borshay Liem is consequently compelled to seek alternative kinships with women likewise affected by militarism and adoption, which the second film explores. Analyzing the films as a pair shows how Borshay Liem interrogates and destabilizes the narratives circulated within transnational adoption and how opportunities for nonbiological kinship are rooted in inevitable failings of the familial. I contend that these failures are not due to racial or national differences between family members, but because of ideals shared by the US and South Korea about adoption based in Korean histories of sexual violence.

The second and third chapters of the dissertation focus on contemporary Korean American novels that feature strained parent-child relationships to register the sexual violence within the World War II Japanese military "comfort" camps. I consider the role of queerness threaded throughout the novels' representations of the military outposts and Korean comfort women, revealing that Korean American intergenerational models contain multiple sexualities and kinships as a result of Japanese colonialism and US militarization. In Chapter two I discuss Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997), which prioritizes the point of view of women to

discuss the aftermath of war. The novel is centered on a mother-daughter relationship: Akiko, the mother and a former Korean comfort woman; and Beccah, her mixed race American daughter. Scholars of Asian American literary studies often interpret Beccah's storyline as a gendered legacy in which she inevitably inherits Akiko's history of sexual traumas. Rather than rely solely on a family model to discuss the daughter's relationship to her mother's past, I frame the novel's intergenerational relationship through Akiko's queer desires that originate from relationships with the other comfort women at the military camp. In the wake of public discussions about the sexual violence endured by Korean comfort woman, I argue that another way to construct a feminist rewriting of genealogies is to recognize the role of queer relationships in the daughter's conception.

In Chapter three, similar to the previous chapter, I focus on the queer narrative in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999), which existing scholarship has overlooked in favor of the father-daughter storyline. On the surface, it appears that Franklin "Doc" Hata's insistence on creating an American nuclear family with his Korean adopted daughter, Sunny, is repentance for serving for the Japanese Imperial Army during WWII and his involvement with Korean comfort women. Using queer theories of kinship and attachment, I contend that Lee encourages a critique of Hata's adherence to normative models of kinship and belonging, but not through easy condemnations of the protagonist's choices. I contend that the novel's queer relations exist at the margins of the family narrative. By using reading practices that center the comfort woman characters, I argue that these queer relations organize the novel's larger investment in addressing the multiple institutions responsible for gendered and sexual violence.

Chapter four discusses *EDINBURGH: a novel,* by Alexander Chee (2001) to examine the process of racialization for a biracial subject within the context of the narrative's complicated

instances of sexuality and trauma. The protagonist is a gay Korean American, Aphias "Fee" Zhe, who is sexually abused as a child, and whose family histories involve Korean comfort women and colonialism. Chee's decision to prioritize sexual violence and sexual development within the narrative pushes issues of race and Fee's racialization to the margins, presenting a seemingly postracial subject. I read the novel through a queer of color critique, tracing the effects of sexual trauma throughout the narrative, to show that Fee's lack of concern about his race is an unavoidable result of his childhood experiences with racialized desires and the figure of the child victim. The figure of the biracial, gay child, I argue, is unable to fit the model of the child victim—formed from a version of childhood sexuality that defines innocence through whiteness—and consequently must seek alternative affiliations made possible by same-sex desire.

I began the introduction with a close reading of Grace M. Cho's "Kimchi Blues" to establish how the formation of families within the Korean diaspora, since the 1950s and ongoing, is a process built on uneven racial and gendered experiences due to US militarization. The histories of sexuality directly formed from Japanese colonialism and US militarization produce certain figures—the Korean comfort woman, the mixed race child, and the transnational Korean adoptee. Each chapter explores the representation of one or more of these figures in fiction and film. Through a genealogical study of these figures, my projects resists the premise that the adoptee is an exceptional figure for her supposed lack of access to history; and conversely, that the existence of a family history guarantees access to larger, social histories. Through feminist and queer theories, I argue that the normative and queer kinships models represented in my selected texts make a case for increased discussions of lineage and genealogies that are not

predicated on biology or procreation, generating fuller understandings of how intimacies are created and sustained in the Korean diaspora.

## CHAPTER 1: WHO IS CHA JUNG HEE?: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE KOREAN ORPHAN AND KINSHIP IN BORSHAY LIEM'S FIRST-PERSON ADOPTION DOCUMENTARIES

Right before she was put on an airplane flying from South Korea to the United States, eight-year-old Kang Ok Jin was told by the Sun Duck orphanage director, "Don't tell your new parents who you *really* are until you are old enough to take care of yourself."[13] This ominous advice, as filmmaker Deann Borshay Liem explains in her two documentaries on her adoption experiences, was prompted by the fact that the child on the plane was supposed to be Cha Jung Hee, but Kang Ok Jin—later renamed Deann Borshay—was purposefully sent instead. In California, meanwhile, the Borshays, an American family, were expecting the Korean child with whom they had been corresponding as a part of an international foster care program through Foster Parents' Plan, Inc. The Borshays had been sending money to Cha Jung Hee for over two years when the family decided to adopt her in 1966. But before Cha Jung Hee was sent to California, a family member claimed her and she left the orphanage. Kang Ok Jin, who also resided at Sun Duck Orphanage, was chosen to take Cha Jung Hee's place. Documents were forged, names and birthdays altered, and when she arrived, the Borshays believed that Kang Ok Jin was Cha Jung Hee, an orphaned child in need of a family.

Filmmaker Deann Borshay Liem explores the circumstances surrounding her adoption in two first-person documentaries, *First Person Plural* (2000) and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* (2010). Structured around Borshay Liem's returns to Korea in search of information, the films curate visual archives of the material objects associated with transnational Korean adoption, from family photographs and home videos to letters and official adoption documents, to explore the question, who *is* Cha Jung Hee? In *First Person Plural*, the documentary follows Borshay

[13] *First Person Plural,* dir. Borshay Liem, chapter 2.

Liem to Korea as she gathers her Korean and US families together in the same space, seeking potential resolution through an expanded notion of family. After Deann, as an adult, happened to find a photograph in her adoption file of a child who is not her, catalyzing the discovery that she is not "Cha Jung Hee: the orphan," the realization creates an untenable burden and sets up the film's psychic dilemma of being caught between two families.[14] In the 2000 documentary, Borshay Liem predominantly uses photographs, home video footage, and personal interviews with Korean and American relatives to capture her experiences of loss and desires for familial and cultural acceptance. *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* documents Borshy Liem's return to Korea to find the original Cha Jung Hee, the person behind the identity Borshay Liem was given during her duplicitous adoption process. In addition to the same objects featured in *First Person Plural,* Borshay Liem also incorporates Korean television and print media, as well as formal and informal interviews and investigations in her search for Cha Jung Hee, enabling the director to question the institutional and cultural practices associated with the Korean transnational adoption industry. Despite their distinct narrative choices and content, both documentaries continue to question the circumstances surrounding Borshay Liem's adoption, revealing the extent to which dominant cultural narratives about transnational Korean adoption in the decades following the Korean War hinge on the construction of the potential Korean adoptee as always orphaned.

Borshay Liem's *First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* have become familiar and widely circulated representations of the Korean adoptee experience. Shown at national and international adoption conferences and in college classes on Asian American studies, these films poignantly convey the effects of racial difference and loss on an adoptee's

[14] Aside from her directorial and production credits, Deann Borshay Liem is also the narrator of *First Person Plural* (2000) and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* (2010). Borshay is her US adopted family name; Liem is her married name. This chapter alternates between referencing Deann by the first name and her professional surname *Borshay Liem* to maintain a distinction between the person within and the creator of the documentaries.

identity formation and adoptive experiences. Often regarded as return narratives, Borshay Liem's first-person documentary films, and especially *First Person Plural*, are characterized by their formal adherence to the search-and-reunion genre, in which an American-based adoptee finds resolution in their country of birth. As Eleana J. Kim explains, "Within the structure demanded of generic narrative conventions of exposition, conflict, and resolution, these documentaries build tension about a central conflict for the adoptee between longing for the birth family and assimilation into adoptive family" ("Producing Missing Persons" 78). Describing the end of *First Person Plural*, Kim is referencing how Borshay Liem decides that her American mother, Alveen Borshay, has been her mother "all along." Similarly, in the final scenes of *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*, when Borshay Liem believes that she has found the original Cha Jung Hee, the filmmaker admits, "I originally thought, if I gave back Cha Jung Hee's shoes, I would be free of the identity they symbolized. But I realize: they don't belong to her; they belong to me. Although I arrived in America, walking in Cha Jung Hee's shoes, I can see now, the path I've taken has always been my own."[15] And despite how the reunions "open up new questions," as Kim claims, the narrative insistence on resolution by the films' conclusions suggests fidelity to the very institutions—such as the family, the orphanage, the adoption agency, and the nation-state—that created the initial conflicts, deceptions, and general need for answers.

*First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* also contribute to the growing collection of first-person narratives created by adult adoptees to articulate their adoptive experiences within and against larger adoption discourses. Following the publication of *Seeds from a Silent Tree* (1997), the first anthology authored exclusively by Korean American adoptees, US adult adoptees have increasingly produced various works of art, film, performance,

[15] *In the Matter*, dir. Borshay Liem, chapter 8.

literature, and scholarship.[16] The emergence of adult adoptee cultural works marks an adoptee coming-of-age within the history of transnational Korean adoption practices in the US, consequently reframing how adoption is understood within its own field, as well as within the study of Asian American culture and history. The incorporation of the adoptees' voices into existing discussions about Korean adoption and adoptees draws attention to how adoption narratives are affected and altered when the adoptee shifts from being regarded as the object of adoption practices to the subject who narrates their perspective of what it means to be adopted.

This chapter focuses on the role of narratives within discussions about transnational Korean adoption and how Borshay Liem represents those narratives within her documentary films. This includes considering how first-person adoptee narratives, like *First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*, emerge in conversation with earlier adoption studies research that prioritized social workers and social scientists' perspectives on Korean adoption. The act of telling her story, for instance, could be interpreted as Borshay Liem reclaiming her past and sense of self by pushing back on the beliefs, policies, and practices that tended to prioritize other discourses (the legal, psychological, national, familial) and other others' perspectives (the scholars, social workers, and adopted parents) over the adoptee's. But rather than take for granted that the documentary films produce the most truthful accounts about Korean transnational adoption practices and experiences, I examine how Borshay Liem's films depict her personal narrative as intertwined with multiple narratives and perspectives, built from specific cultural and nationalist ideologies that contributed to the formation of the post-World

[16] Adoption scholar SooJin Pate credits Korean adoptee and filmmaker Nathan Adolfson for providing context regarding the growing number of cultural works by adult Korean adoptees, that the influx of art, films, and memoirs is partially due to generations of Korean adoptees who were adopted as children between the 1960s-1980s and are now at an age to express their personal narratives (8). Kim Park Nelson makes a similar point about how the "first visible generation of transracial adoptees came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s" ("Loss" 102). In the 2010 documentary, Borshay Liem states that her initial trips to meet her Korean mother and siblings occurred in the 1980s.

War II, mid-twentieth century US nuclear family. This approach focuses on the films' formal qualities, such as Borshay Liem's directorial decision to cut black and white footage of the Korean War and its aftermath into her adoptive narrative, that contextualize her experiences through the Cold War military and political agendas that shaped how the US and South Korea managed the excess of Korean orphans during the 1950s and 1960s. The very conditions of warfare and US neocolonialism and militarism within the Korean diaspora that produced thousands of actual Korean orphans, also constructed Cha Jung Hee, an imagined Korean orphan in need of a family. This chapter examines how the figure of Cha Jung Hee sets off a series of questions that Borshay Liem explores through first-person narratives to reveal the complicated nature of kinship for transnational adoptees. I assert that according to Borshay Liem's films, the beliefs that America is a prosperous nation and the Korean adoptee is "lucky" to have been adopted are not limited to the Borshay family's treatment of Deann, but are a part of a larger, liberal narrative upheld and rehearsed by various Korean and American individuals connected to the transnational Korean adoption industry. As the chapter's opening airport scene between Ok Jin/Deann and the orphanage director illustrates, the figure of the Korean orphan contributes directly to the narrative that an adoptee's life in the US, even if built on deception, is far better than any potential life that might have been lived in Korea.

To understand how the figure of an orphan, such as Cha Jung Hee, is a necessary feature for the formation of US families with Korean adoptees, my analysis builds on two significant studies on kinship and Cold War politics. The first is Christina Klein's C*old War Orientalism* and her main claim that integration, in addition to containment, ideologically explains how white American families' became personally involved in US foreign policies involving Asian nations and bodies during 1945-1961. The second is SooJin Pate's *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S.*

*Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption* and her argument that, starting in 1945, the construction and promotion of orphanages by the US military and missionaries established the cultural practices in Korea that would later use "transnational adoption as South Korea's primary method for child welfare and social services" following the Korean War (23). The construction of the Korean orphan enables the Borshay family to believe that Jung Hee/Deann belongs to them because she lacks living relatives in Korea. As Borshay Liem narrates within *First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*, the documents connected to her adoption, such as the letters exchanged during the years of sponsorship, the official adoption documents, and photographs sent by the orphanage, are granted authority over the adoptee. When Deann tries to tell her American mother the truth about her origins—that her Korean name is Kang Ok Jin and that she has a Korean mother and siblings—Alveen Borhsay reasoned: "Look at these adoption documents. Your mother died giving birth to you…You're a war orphan and both your parents are dead."[17] It was easy for the Borshay family to discount Deann's personal story because the existence of war orphans and the belief that Americans have a moral obligation to help Third World countries carried a greater weight in the Cold War cultural imaginary. As SooJin Pate discusses in her analysis of the orphan in relation to the adoptee, the pervasive rhetoric of humanitarian aid used to describe US military intervention in Korea beginning in 1945 meant that American families like the Borshays were more likely to accept and uphold the story of Cha Jung Hee: the orphan, than the truth spoken by Deann (34-5).

This chapter's analysis is organized around the two films' treatment of the question of Cha Jung Hee, which I contend, is central for Borshay Liem as she narrates her experiences of being adopted and explores the subsequent kinship relations available to her. In this way, this question acts as a bridge between two otherwise distinct documentaries, but also structures the

[17] *First Person Plural*, dir. Borshay Liem, chapter 3 and *In the Matter*, dir. Borshay Liem, chapter 1.

ways Borshay Liem's narrative moves between self-expression and critique within both films. I examine how the search-and reunion genre enables Borshay Liem to control—and push back on—the existing adoption discourses (familial, national, historical, and institutional) that seek to control her identity, representation, and self-expressions when the answers to her questions are always already insufficient. I propose that while the films follow familiar narrative conventions on the surface, Borshay Liem's prioritization and exploration of the questions associated with her adoption undermines the power otherwise instilled in the archival materials related to her adoption. Her use of a familiar storyline of returning to Korea is meant to reveal how answers are shaped—and left incomplete—by the questions the frames allow, which suggests that Borshay Liem understands her story as unresolved because she is both the object and subject of her adoption.

*First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*, I argue, both represent the possibility for kinship built on loss. To explain this, I focus on the documentaries' repeated moments of failure and inconclusiveness to examine how the integration model, based on normative familial structures and the liberal narrative that adoptees are better off having been adopted, consistently prevents Deann from achieving the sense of belonging through the familial. Some critics of *First Person Plural* have argued that the Borshays, her adopted family, are the ones who have clearly failed Deann because they are unable to accommodate racial difference or understand their role in her experiences of loss. However, I consider the Kang family's adherence to the US imperial, liberal narrative that adoptees are "lucky" to have been put up for adoption to be the more significant familial-based failure of the 2000 documentary. This narrative, established in the decades following World War II by US missionaries and military soldiers, prevents the Kang family from unconditionally welcoming Deann back into their family

as their child/daughter/sister. Rather than consider these familial and cultural misalignments to be resolutions in and of themselves, I argue they create opportunities for Deann to seek alternative kinships not modeled after nuclear dynamics or biological relations, as evidenced by *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*.

My discussion of queer kinship is based on queer scholar JeeYeun Lee's argument that diasporic subjects have complex relationships to their own histories, but also must not be determined by them. When thinking about transnational adoptees within the Korean diaspora, we must remember Lee's point that "reclaiming biological and cultural lines of heritage have been particularly important for peoples forcibly denied knowledge of their histories. However, when diasporic communities are defined solely on these terms, *other forms of affiliation cannot be recognized*, exclusionary boundaries are fixed into place, and alliances cannot shift to meet the ever-changing forms of hegemony" (195, my emphasis). Lee's framework for a queer Korean American diasporic history validates the search for a real or imagined homeland (as well as biological kin) but prioritizes the adoptees' gendered and classed affiliations produced from conditions of militarization involving the US, as opposed to nationalist conceptions of home or belonging. Similarly, I am interested in how complex—often ambivalent—desires open up conversations about kinship relations and migrations, rather than simply defining the adoptees' identity through singular notions of return, or strict adherence to categories of avowal and rejection.

**Cha Jung Hee: the Korean Orphan-Turned-Adoptee**

The construction of the Korean orphan, I contend, is at the center of the narratives that circulate within transnational Korean adoption. Borshay Liem is able to interrogate those narratives within her films, in part, because of the inaccuracies within the narrative that she is

Cha Jung Hee and arrived to the US as an orphan in need. *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* provides an explanation of the preferred, but altogether inaccurate story of the political, economic, and familial conditions that enabled Deann to be adopted by Borshay family: "When I asked my mother about my childhood, she always told me the same story: 'your real mother died while giving birth to you and your father was killed during the Korean War. That's why we adopted you'." The images that accompany Borshay Liem's voiceover are scenes of news footage depicting displaced Koreans, further illustrating how US media coverage about a war-torn nation and suffering Koreans encouraged international foster and adoption practices, in the decades following the Korean War.[18] But in fact, Borshay Liem's Korean mother had not died prior to Ok Jin/Deann's adoption, and it was impossible for the Korean War to have directly caused Borshay Liem's adoption because she was born in 1957, four years after the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement. Nonetheless, Deann's fictionalized history demonstrates how strongly Americans wanted to connect presumptive humanitarian practices of transnational adoption with the war's destruction and subsequent creation of imagined and actual orphans.[19]

The scripted story of how Deann came to the Borshay family does more than inaccurately represent her Korean family and the conditions under which she arrived in the US. As a commanding origin story, the narrative helps to maintain the very process of turning Cha Jung Hee into an unattached orphan available for and in need of adoption. The inherent contradictions with the figure of Cha Jung Hee, the orphan, involve a process in which her adoptive family

[18] *In the Matter*, dir. Borshay Liem, chapter 1.

[19] The status of orphan is complicated in its relationship to accuracy and its seeming truthfulness, especially for Borshay Liem. According to Pate, the designation of orphan, in the context of transnational adoption, emerged in the aftermath of the Korean War, when "all displaced Korean children—whether or not their parents were living—were categorized as orphaned…The label *orphan*, as it was used after the war, was a misnomer because many of the war orphans had at least one parent living. In the case of mixed-race orphans, both parents were usually alive. Thus, the category of orphans included not only children who were orphaned but also those who were abandoned and lost" (77).

must simultaneously acknowledge her birth parents and then disavow their existence in order to make room for Deann Borshay, the adoptee. More than imagine Cha Jung Hee as a Korean child without living relatives, the Borshays rendered Cha Jung Hee an empty vessel whose potential for personhood is dependent on her adoptive family, which Jodi Kim argues is a form of social death adoptees and birth mothers experience as a result of adoption practices (*Ends of Empire* 169-70). The result produces Deann, the Borshay's adopted child, ensuring incompatibility between who she was in Korea and who she is in the US. Because, as SooJin Pate argues, "Perceiving the postwar Korean child as both a member of the national and domestic family required the child to be stripped of his or her national and kinship ties," the belief that Deann, and adoptees in general, did not have living parents helped ensure that she arrive to the US evacuated of a history, a family, and lacking a sense of self (77). This process also helps ensure that adoptive US families aren't implicated in separating parents and children in Korea, allowing adoptive parents to see themselves as rescuers rather than potential kidnappers.

During her childhood, Deann Borshay was provided a sense of self from fictional narratives based in Cold War era political agendas and rehearsed by her American family. As a complicated historical subject who must question most aspects of what was told to her as a child, Borshay Liem documents within *First Person Plural* her process of realizing that orphan and adoptee are "not natural, inherent, or knowable categor[ies] of identity" (Pate 101), an understanding of self that was forced to crisis by the inconsistencies in her adoption materials and information. In the opening moments of *First Person Plural*, Borshay Liem's voiceover explains her multiple, overlapping identities:

> My name is Kang Ok Jin. I was born on June 14, 1957. I feel like I've been several different people in one life. My name is Cha Jung Hee. I was born on

> November 5, 1956. I've had three names, three different sets of histories. My name is Deann Borshay. I was born March 3, 1966, the moment I stepped off the airplane in San Francisco. I've spoken different languages and I've had different families.[20]

Deann's personal narration about her adoption and its influence on identity presents a sharp contrast from the story Deann's mother tells. Borshay Liem places the emphasis on how her sense of self is shaped by an excess of names and birth dates, hinting at the difficulty of understanding herself under the weight of three different sets of histories and an uncertainty about when her story begins.

Critical responses to the opening moments of *First Person Plural* argue that Borshay Liem is expressing how adoption practices powerfully manipulate the adopted child's personhood by writing over and negating one's past. According to Jodi Kim, the "triplicate of names and identities…bespeaks not only the complex transnational and transracial adoptee subjectivity, but also the material conditions of possibility for such a triangulated and entangled personal history" (*Ends of Empire* 174). David L. Eng observes how this scene reflects the "animating desires and projections of her American family" and how "adoptees are born *legally* at the moment of transfer of parental rights from the (absent) birth mother to adoptive parents…the birth mother and 'back there' no longer exist" (*Feeling of Kinship* 114). Building from Jodi Kim and Eng's claims, I analyze this scene as Borshay Liem emphasizing the power of narratives, but not prioritizing a need for absolute truth, to characterize her adoptive experiences. Through the repetition of phrases *My name is* and *I was born on*, Borshay Liem carries the weight of multiple potential narratives that reflect the social, political, and historical factors that made transnational adoption possible. That Borshay Liem feels as though she's "been several

[20] *First Person Plural*, dir. Borshay Liem, chapter 1 and 2.

different people in one life," is not a statement on identity, per se. Rather, this recitation of names and dates is meant to highlight how the objective for turning an imagined Korean orphan into an adoptee, with its emphases on singularity and negation, is to ensure the Korean child is a suitable subject for the American, adoptive family.

**Looking Back To Look Forward: Shared Failures between the Adoptee and Family**

*First Person Plural*, in particular, offers raw, sometimes unflattering portrayals of how an adoptee comes to understand herself in relation to her adoptive family members. If the documentary clearly depicts the extent to which Deann's experiences with her American family—and in turn, with US national culture—required her silence and her disavowal of her Korean past, then moments with awkward interactions and narrative interruptions draw attention to how seamless integration into the adoptive family was not possible.

Throughout the documentary, Deann clearly struggles with her sense of self, due largely to the way the Borshays view her and her adoption into their family. An often-analyzed set of scenes involves her sister Denise, and then a conversation between Deann and her American mother, Alveen. Denise and Alveen separately reflect on Ok Jin/Deann's airport arrival to the US; their impressions carry a similar tone and express the family's general excitement regarding Deann. Neither account is devoid of awkward moments or emotional disruptions within the otherwise joyful narrative about adoption. In one scene Denise is the only person in the frame and speaks directly to the camera as she explains her uncertainty regarding transnational adoption: "I think Mother went up to the wrong person…[*off camera:* Deann's quiet iteration, "the wrong person?" is barely audible] yah. I think we didn't know until we checked your name tag or something. It didn't matter; I mean, pfft, one of them was ours" [the scene closes with the sister's laughter; Deann's laughter joins in after a beat]. It is difficult to overlook the casual

manner in which Denise invokes the language of property and ownership, and indeed, David L. Eng and Jodi Kim have each acknowledged how such wording attempts to lay claim to Deann and her position within the Borshay family.

Yet there is very little commentary on Deann's laughter that joins her sister's at the end. Borshay Liem desires to comply by aligning herself with, or at least not disputing, Denise's version of the airport event. The two women's laughter ambivalently signals how both find humor in the situation, yet, each person clearly feels discomfort. In the scene that directly follows, Alveen and Deann are in the shot together, sitting on a hotel bed. Over home-video footage of Deann's arrival at the airport, Alveen explains, "when you arrived, little stoic face, bundled up in all those clothes… we couldn't talk to you and you couldn't talk to us. And I realize now that you were terrified, but because we were so happy, you know, we just didn't think about that" (*First Person Plural* chapter 2). In response to these scenes, Eng rightly observes that, "As a collective social unit, the family cannot recognize Borshay Liem's racial melancholia: Borshay Liem's losses remain unaffirmed and unacknowledged by those closest to her" (*Feeling of Kinship* 121). Eng's focus on the adopted family and their interpretations of Deann's experiences, that the Borshay's "cannot easily conceive of her adoption as involving loss, or that they cannot easily imagine her arrival in the United States as anything but an unequivocal gain," compellingly situates the relationship between racialization and loss within the relationships created by familial dynamics. But Deann remains absent within Eng's observations, positioning Deann the adoptee as an object within these processes with little agency. While that may have been true for when Deann was a child, and especially in the early years of her integration to the Borshay family, it's important to note that these scenes within

*First Person Plural* are looking back, rather than narrating an on-going dynamic between Deann and Denise, or Deann and Alveen.

The uneasy laughter and small revisions or amendments to the Borshay family's accounts within the film are important interruptions to an otherwise seamless and overly rehearsed arrival story in which the adoptee has little to no voice or agency. Alveen Borshay acknowledges that her happiness about Deann's adoption is *now* informed by the conjecture that Deann must have been "terrified," and although she does not expand on her daughter's emotional state in comparison to her own, the overall impression is that Alveen is forced to amend the narrative of the initial interaction. In contrast, Eng argues that Alveen's "delayed reaction and acknowledgement of Borshay Liem's terror some thirty years after the fact creates . . . a 'dialectical image'." For Eng, Alveen's admission does more harm than not and forces both Deann and Alveen into a "repetition compulsion, becoming a return-of-the-repressed, psychically negotiated between daughter and mother" (*Feeling of Kinshp* 123). While I do not want to minimize Deann's emotional pain, I also do not want to reproduce a static representation of the transnational adoptee through her adopted family's inability to imagine Deann as a person with a history prior to her arrival to the US

Deann's return to Korea is part of an ongoing process to define herself in relation to those who would otherwise be characterized as family, not merely an attempt to find her lost or repressed self. Her desire to see her American family and her Korean biological kin in the same room is an effort to unsettle the "unspoken contract between [the Borshay family and myself], which we had all agreed upon but had never discussed, that I was an orphan with no family ties to Korea." While Deann may have agreed as a child to this understanding, her documentary serves as a critically reflective response to her childhood experiences. Moreover, both

documentaries enable adult Deann to honor her child self's voice, which would be muted within her adoptive family's desires for her assimilation. Although the Kangs do not welcome her unconditionally in their family as their daughter or sister, by the end of the visit to Korea, Deann ultimately makes the difficult decision that she cannot approach the Kangs with a "childhood fantasy of returning" (*First Person Plural* chapter 10), and thus she comes to her own important realizations during that visit. She admits that she felt like a "temporary visitor" with the Kangs and that "the only way I can actually be closer to my Korean mother is to admit that she's not my mother anymore. The only way to be close to her is to acknowledge that she hasn't been my mother for over thirty years, and that my other mother [Alveen Borshay] has been my mother—in a way, my real mother."[21] In this moment Deann is realizing that she cannot hold on to the idea that biological ties alone produce kinship bonds that can endure thirty years apart and separation caused by transnational adoption practices. And admittedly, Deann's word choice and repeated use of the word *mother* causes some confusion. But to admit that her Korean mother, Chun Kil-Sun, is not her mother anymore, I argue, is not a refusal of the person, but a desire by Deann to truly mourn so that she can accept the experience of losing her Korean mother as a child. At the very least, words cannot strip away the fact that Chun Kil-Sun gave birth to Deann and was her mother until she arrived in America. Deann is trying to articulate how loss operates within adoption practices, and is making a distinction between mother and the act of mothering: Chun Kil-Sun is her mother, but has not actively mothered Deann in over three decades, despite how Deann imagined Chun Kil-Sun to be her mother all that time. The temporal slippages—how Chun Kil-Sun is not Deann's mother "anymore" but simultaneously "hasn't been my mother for over thirty years"—suggests how overlapping narratives and loss affect an adoptee's sense of

[21] *First Person Plural*, dir. Borshay Liem, chapter 5 & 12; Eng, *Feeling of Kinship,* 129.

time and development. As Deann is thinking aloud for the camera, she is not choosing one woman over another, but reflecting on the temporal lags and overlaps in her development that caused her to have two mothers, even though one was actively her mother (Alveen) and the other was embodied loss (Chun Kil-Sun), but also called *mother*. Eng discusses the issue of two mothers when he asks, "why we have numerous poststructuralist accounts of language but few poststructuralist accounts of kinship. . . As an instance of globalization and its discontents, transnational adoption opens upon the difficult affective terrain of poststructuralist notions of family and kinship precisely through the problem and possibility of two mothers" (*Feeling of Kinship* 135). But in the end, Eng has serious doubts. He concludes that the transnational adoptee, as a subject who supposedly "cannot in turn create space in her mind for two good-enough mothers," means that the "possibility of poststructuralist kinship is dubious at best" (*Feeling of Kinship* 136). If Deann's two mothers were temporally in sync, or as Deann develops more comfort with the ways that her mothers are temporally asynchronous—and subsequently so is she—I would argue that she *could* have enough space in her mind for two mothers. As queer scholars continue to develop poststructuralist accounts of kinship, then we must be willing to push against and expand our associations with structuralist categories like mother and daughter. What the adoptee offers is the opportunity to think about the temporal aspects of the language that constructs intimacies.

In the last scenes of the documentary, Borshay Liem describes her childhood fantasies of return, that the Borshays would send her back to Korea if she was "good enough." But she acknowledges that as a result of seeing her two families in the same room, "that childhood fantasy of returning to my family is, starting to…get away from me." She realizes that as an adult that "I have to develop another—a different kind of relationship with my Korean family.

It's not like I can just plop back in as a child" (*First Person Plural* chapter 12). Deann's realizations at the end of the documentary demonstrate that although a young adoptee often bases her understandings of self within and against her family's expectations, it is possible—and perhaps necessary—to eventually release ourselves from normative thinking and be willing to reconfigure how we construct the familial and kinship.

Rather than interpret Borshay Liem's relationship with her family as markers of failure that are unproductive, I posit that uneven relations are ideal opportunities to make and sustain queer kinships that do not abide by rules of biology, resemblance, or heredity. The difficult relationships between Deann and the Borshays and the Kangs demonstrate that relations and roles within families cannot be taken for granted or scripted. In those ways, queer kinships help us rethink connection, rather than something stabilized at a single moment in time to something more fluid and in process. With the example of the adoptive family, relationships between all family members should be reaffirmed, rearticulated, and reassessed constantly, but not in ways that reproduce heteronormativity or prioritize normative understandings of child-rearing or being related. The parent-child models constructed by transnational adoption practices enable scholars of Asian American studies to think outside of biological determinism and create an imaginative space to consider how genealogies do not have to be bound by discussions of "blood," "biological lineage," or "reproductive heritage."

**Loss and Kinship within Transnational Korean Adoption Narratives**

Loss is an important element in the construction of adoptees as social orphans: the narrative that those adopted have no ties to biological kin helps to sever connections to the

country of origin and establishes the identity of the Korean child in need of a family and home.[22] However accurate the adoptee's status as an orphan, adoption practices inevitably produce experiences of loss. This becomes a point of mobilization for adoptees who want to know more about their lives prior to adoption and those who advocate for more transparency in transnational adoption procedures. Integral to one's adoptive experiences, then, loss often propels the adopted person into public spaces for discussions of information accessibility and accountability. If we, scholars of transnational adoption studies, understand the potential for loss to motivate an adoptee to seek information that affirms her sense of self, outside of others' expectations and disavowals, then there is potential for mourning to be a shared emotion, exchanged within the interactions between the adoptee and others.

In his discussion of *First Person Plural*, David L. Eng asks: "How might we begin to analyze Borshay Liem's affective losses?" (*Feeling of Kinship* 115). The answer, for Eng, is more broadly conceived by incorporating the Korean American adoptee's experiences into larger psychoanalytic discussions of Asian American immigration and assimilation. Racial melancholia, in particular, and its "social and psychic structures of loss emerging from Asian immigrant experiences that can be worked through only with considerable pain and difficulty," provides the context to understand Borshay Liem's desire to return to Korea in the first documentary (*Feeling of Kinship* 115). Citing Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," and his theorization of lost objects, Eng argues that the dynamic between the adoptee and her country of

[22] The term *social orphan* refers to the previously discussed process of rendering Korean orphans and transnational adoptees "exceptional state subject[s]," leaving both subjects with "the barest of social identities" and without "social personhood" (J. Kim 169). In *Adopted Territory,* Elena J. Kim cites Giorgio Agamben's "bare life" to discuss how the state and adoption practitioners use the rescue narrative to "subvert adoptees' attempts to frame adoption in political terms" (254-56). SooJin Pate contributes to these discussions through her analyses on the role the US military and the postwar Korean social welfare system, the emergence of the Korean orphan, and the normalization and Americanization of potential adoptees while in South Korean orphanages, prior to their arrival to the US.

origin is predominantly melancholic, subsequently characterizing loss as signifying lack (*Feeling of Kinship* 115-16).[23] Jodi Kim analyzes first-person adoption narratives through a similar psychoanalytic lens, describing them as "fantasies of return, projections of loss, and desires for reunion" (172-73). Eleana J. Kim equally observes how "In Korean adoptive narratives, loss has emerged as a common theme and for some, loss of biogenetic connections and genealogical knowledge is frequently accompanied by or conflated with a longing for cultural roots" (*Adopted Territory* 91). Although Eng further clarifies that racial melancholia, as a part of an overall Asian American experience, is more about "conflict rather than damage" (121), his discussion of loss in relation to adoptees' experiences suggest a continued skepticism about the search-and-reunion narrative as generative beyond a reproduction of adoptees' (self) characterizations as wounded and incomplete.

But what happens when the answers sought by Korean adoptees are inconclusive? What is the relationship between disrupted genealogies and a sense of self? With regards to their adoptive experiences, as well as when explicitly searching, transnational adoptees must confront the possibility that many do not possess or have access to official documents. In some cases, paperwork is missing or forged or insufficient. If an adoptee cannot access biological kinship ties (or the paperwork which would verify that such relations once existed), then loss may be the most tangible thing an adoptee could possess and use as a form of agency. Loss in relation to Korean transnational adoption, then, is not solely defined by supposed abandonment or the lack

[23] Eng further expands on Freud's work on melancholia and defines racial melancholia as "a depathologized structure of feeling, pointing to those unidentified affects marking emergent group formations and identities" (121). He positions racial melancholia within the larger context of Asian American experiences by arguing, "If experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racialization in the United States are fundamentally determined both through the forced relinquishing of lost but unspeakable Asian ideals and through foreclosed investments in idealized whiteness, then we might justifiably describe racial melancholia as a normal group experience for Asian Americans" (121). Thus, racial melancholia is not exclusive to transnational adoptees' experiences; it is not a fringe affective experience. It is, according to Eng, a significant part of all Asian Americans' subject formation.

of truth and transparency within its practices, but by the ways the adoptee subject formation is shaped by failures, exemplified by incompleteness, excess, and misalignments.[24]

**Situating the Autobiographical Genre within First-Person Adoptee Cultural Production**

The act of narration—to tell one's story—is a powerful way for an adoptee to articulate and navigate their subject formation as it emerges from existing discourses *and* comes into its own articulations. According to Korean adoption scholar Kim Park Nelson, the "genre of memoir, both filmed and written, has emerged as the predominant form within transracial adoptee cultural production, in a body of work that has been growing since the mid-1990s" ("Loss" 102), noting how this genre provides adoptees sufficient narrative space to articulate their experiences while also allowing them to enter existing discussions on their own terms. These first-person narratives, Park Nelson further argues, reflect adoptees' authorial desire to speak back to the transnational adoption discussions that center adopted parents and adoption agencies over the adoptee subject. The autobiographical within first-person narratives, then, is not merely about representation, but "attempt[s] to take control of a discourse that intimately involves them, but so far has tended to ignore their voices" (Park Nelson 107). In her essay on Korean adult adoptee visual culture, anthropologist Eleana J. Kim focuses on reception, noting how scholars have paid most attention to adoptee documentaries and memoirs, using those texts as "windows into the adoptee experience and subjectivity" ("Missing Person" 77). Although the

[24] The notion of a fragmented Asian American subjectivity due to immigrations and relocations has been heavily discussed within Asian American studies. I do not wish to make the transnational Korean adoptee an exceptional Asian American subject; however, it's not always clear how transnational adoption and the adoptee fit into existing conversations about Asian American history and culture. For instance, although Eng assigns racial melancholia to the adoptee, he also acknowledges how, until recently, the figure of the transnational adoptee "has been noticeably absent from diaspora and immigration studies," which prompts him to ask: "Is the transnational adoptee an immigrant… an Asian American? (*Feeling of Kinship* 94). Similarly, Eleana J. Kim asserts "As neither native [Korean] nor immigrant, adoptees existed in partial relation to dominant categories of national belonging" (*Adopted Territory* 103). In my discussion of loss and kinship, I am trying to claim that loss is embodied, but not essential to an adoptee's subjectivity. Doing so would provide new ways of thinking about first-person narratives and in particular, Borshay Liem's documentaries.

essay's larger discussion is about adult adoptee artistic contributions to representations of adoptee experiences, Kim's use of the term *windows* is poignant, suggesting how the memoir and documentary genres enable some to view adoptees' first-person cultural works as inherently stable stories with the capacity to bear truths. But to imagine memoirs and documentaries as windows risks shifting the critical focus away from the production of subjects and narratives within first-person accounts and instead, uses the adoptee's experiences and subjectivity as context or evidence for larger, existing discussions of racialization for Korean adoptee, US Cold War politics involving Asian nations, or US immigration and assimilation during the second-half of the twentieth century.

Kim Park Nelson and Eleana J. Kim's interpretations of the autobiographical (authorial role and scholarly reception of) within widely-circulated adult adoptee cultural works participate in a larger discussion about the relationship between adoptee identity, representation, and adoption rhetoric, specifically underscoring how adoptee subject formation and articulations about identity are inevitably tied to the existing narratives about and discourses associated with adoption practices and policies. An adoptee's identity, no matter how it is expressed, is a contestation of rhetoric and narratives in which the adoptee's first-person narrative is often described as subordinate and working against the dominant adoption narratives. What exactly these dominant narratives are and how they affect the adoptee, however, constitute very different discussions and implications within transnational adoption studies. For Park Nelson and others, the memoir and documentary are important objects because the adoptee's personal narrative critiques the institutional, state-sanctioned, and celebratory adoption narratives that risk defining adoption, and thus the adoptee, without input from the adoptee herself. These discussions about memoirs are invested in voice as critique, framing the adoptee's memoir as a part of the shifting

conversations in adoption studies. Recent works by David L. Eng, Jodi Kim, and Catherine Ceniza Choy understand adoptee memoirs and documentaries to be more representative of how adoption practices and policies configure the adoptee in particular racialized and gendered ways, complicating the existing narratives produced by quantitative and empirical studies conducted by social workers and case consultants. Such arguments characterize the savior-based, liberal narratives that emgered following World War II about adoption as insufficient and the ones by adoptees as crucial to properly understand the biopolitical within transnational adoption. In slight contrast, Eleana J. Kim has concerns about Asian American studies and adoption studies scholars' tendency to analyze adoption documentaries and memoirs at the exclusion of other visual arts. This approach, Kim cautions, does not require scholars to question how certain narratives and their genre conventions construct and put into circulation a version of the adoptee subject deemed worthy for academic consideration. Documentaries like *First Person Plural*, Kim argues, produce the "dominant narratives of [the] transnational adoptee experience" by perpetuating the search-and-reunion storyline, which characterizes the adoptee as a person defined by her search for biological relations ("Missing Persons" 78). These narratives are misleading in their easy resolutions about an adoptee's "true" family, and subsequently, an adoptee's "authentic" self. Because of the wide circulation of and academic attention regarding these types of first-person storylines, Kim is concerned that a flattened, single, and ultimately inaccurate idea of the transnational Korean adoptee has been naturalized as universal.

Due to its prevalence within adult adoptee cultural production, the search-and-reunion genre, with its emphasis on loss, conflict, and a return to one's birth country, has indeed crafted a familiar storyline about modern transnational adoption and transracial adoptees. According to these conventions, which *First Person Plural* follows, the adoptee's true identity will emerge

through the recovery of a lost history and/or the discovery of biological family members. Characteristic of the now-prolific genre, then, is the promise that by the end of the one's journey (which coincides with the end of the film), that which the adoptee seeks will provide closure for the adoptee and audience alike.[25] For *First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee,* the question of Cha Jung Hee—who she is and how a falsified identity facilitated an adoption—is the reason for Borshay Liem's returns to Korea, with hopes of reuniting with specific individuals and gaining answers. At the end of both films, Borshay Liem caps the searches with a moment of reflection in which she acknowledges which questions were answered, which remain open, and what she has learned from the experience.

My analyses of the films value Borshay Liem's narrative voice, echoing the arguments by Kim Park Nelson and others, to assert that a search for answers can also be a critique against institutional narratives that objectify the adoptee and her experiences. The critiques, thus, are not directed at individuals featured in the films, such as Alveen Borshay or the social worker, Hyo-sun Park, who is responsible for passing Kang Ok Jin off as Cha Jung Hee in the Borshay adoption. On the contrary, Borshay Liem is more invested in exposing the colonial and capitalist practices within the transnational adoption industry that targeted women like Chun Kil-Sun, Borshay Liem's Korean mother, to relinquish custody of Ok Jin to the Sun Duck Orphanage.

**Searching for Answers, Searching for Cha Jung Hee**

At first glance, it seems that for the 2010 documentary, Borshay Liem has purposely created distance between her search for Cha Jung Hee and desires for familial acceptance.

[25] Within the discussion of adoptee cultural production, Kim Park Nelson provides a slightly different interpretation of the memoir genre, characterizing the adoptee narratives within (and in particular, *First Person Plural*) as melodramatic with a "focus on traumatic events and melancholic outcomes" (102). Park Nelson is more focused on the themes of trauma and sadness, as well as the influence of popular culture that solicits "public interest in the extraordinary (and often tragic) dramas of ordinary individuals" (102), rather than how the documentary's genre conventions contribute to the meaning within the Deann's narratives.

Supporting the film's explicit historical contextualization and feminist interpretations of Korea's overseas adoption practices are more official search avenues, including Korean newspapers, the Jeon Ju police station, city hall for copies of the family registry, and a national Korean television show about family reunions. Borshay Liem explains, for instance, that she learned much more about her Korean mother in the past decade and how that information illuminates her understandings of herself. Deann's Korean mother survived the Japanese occupation of Korea before WWII. In describing her mother's "severe hardships," Borshay Liem could "suddenly see the span of my mother's life in the context of history, and I could see that the decision to give me up fit into a lifelong struggle to survive." Heartened as she was to learn "that she looked for me after I left," Borshay Liem minimizes the degree to which she requires her Korean mother to define and validate her own sense of self (*In the Matter* chapter 4). For Borshay Liem to see herself as a historical subject, whose adoption was made possible by the aftermath of the Korean War, it was helpful for her to understand how historical events produce familial relations.

This is how the familial continues to cast its shadow across *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee,* even as the film critiques the Korean adoption industry for selling its children overseas, which contributed significantly to Korea's current flourishing economy. Over a series of images including children in orphanages, US relief effort, and Korean computer and automobile industries, Borshay Liem's voiceover argues that although South Korea's economy began to improve because of the adoption practices immediately following the war, "the country continued to send ever-larger numbers of children overseas" (*In The Matter* chapter 4). Jodi Kim argues that Borshay Liem and "the community of Cha Jung Hees are tied together by gendered vulnerabilities of war" and furthermore, "Cha Jung Hee is *both* the given up child and the mother who must give up, and in this sense, she is the literal embodiment of and the metonymic

figuration of an unending transnational economy of reproductive injustice produced by an unending Korean War" ("The End is Not" 818-9). Furthermore, Borshay Liem notes how "The largest number was in 1985, when on the eve of South Korea's designation as the tenth largest economy in the world, almost nine thousand children were sent away in a single year. Because South Korea failed to invest in adequate social programs, thousands of infants of unwed mothers and children abandoned by families who could not feed or educate them were sent overseas" (*In the Matter* chapter 4). The scene's voiceover critiques the stigmas placed on unwed mothers and Korea's lack of social programs, positioning transnational adoption practices within public discourses, even as the images of Korean women in public continue to underscore Borshay Liem's desire to expand notions of kinship and belonging by positioning herself within a larger community of individuals and Korean society.

Perhaps this move toward the cultural has been influenced by what Borshay Liem's Korean brother stated in the 2000 documentary. In the second half of *First Person Plural,* as the Borshay and Kang families come together, Kang Ho Jin inquires on camera about the message and purpose of the film she is making. Deann responds: "I'm trying to tell a personal story about my experiences being adopted and growing up in America." After listening to the translator relay Deann's answer, Ho Jin observes:

> I feel there was a time when she was confused. Now she seems to have sorted it all out. At the time she may have wondered why she was sent away when the rest of the family stayed together. Families should stay together. But we were hard pressed financially. By sending her away we thought she might have better opportunities than us. We thought it would be better than living with us. All of the adopted children suffered equally in some way. It's not that they were abandoned.

> The children were sent for a better life. We meant well. …We are not very proud of what happened. She really needs to understand the cultural difference between us. Only then will she understand us. (*First Person Plural* chapter 9 & 10)

During Ho Jin's extended response, Deann's Korean mother intermittently interjects in agreement: the family sent Deann away so that she may have educational opportunities and the chance to have a better life. Ho Jin's response, admittedly, does not allow much room for Deann's own emotional response, but his claims also rehearse the good intentions that social workers and orphanage directors, and adoption agencies iterate throughout the 2010 documentary. The parallels between Ho Jin's beliefs on adoption and the statements made by those who work within the Korean transnational adoption industry reflect Korean cultural attitudes regarding the adoptees, grounded in the capitalist, patriarchal ideals brought over from the US during the military occupation between WWII and the Korean War; indeed, none of the aforementioned comments, by Ho Jin or the orphanage directors and social workers, mention the lack of resources for Korean women.

Mothers, birth and adoptive, hold commanding roles within narratives about adoption, to the extent that it's easy to overlook how transnational adoption practices are built on gendered vulnerabilities. At the end of *First Person Plural,* for instance, critical responses have focused on the conversation between Deann and Alveen Borshay, but there has been little attention to the conversation between Deann and Chun Kil-Sun. In the latter pairing, Deann learns how exactly it came to be that her Korean mother gave the Sun Duck Orphanage full custody of Ok Jin, but not any of the other children. As Kil-Sun explains, in the five years following her husband's death, she could barely afford to feed all five of her children, of which Ok Jin was the second-youngest, but could not send them to school. A neighbor who worked for the Sun Duck Orphanage

suggested that Kil-Sun put the three youngest children in the orphanage as a way to help make ends meet. The Korean mother then describes how she was pestered on three different occasions to give up custody of Ok Jin, but refused each time. She would have held fast, but was persuaded by the Christian deacons at the church she attended to sign over Ok Jin. As Kil-Sun states, the deacons argued that "Since I already had three daughters, I should send one to the US to get a better life" (*First Person Plural* chapter 10). This story reiterates how the Korean orphanage and religious leaders targeted single Korean mothers, using the same rhetoric that influenced the Borshays to adopt Cha Jung Hee.

Although many of the materials used in the 2010 documentary are also featured in *First Person Plural*—photos, adoption files, paperwork, and informal interviews—their presentation and deployment markedly differ in the more recent film. For instance, in *First Person Plural*, the camera scans across the two photos from Deann's adoption process, and then zooms in on each, to show the contrast in the facial features of the young girls. But for *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*, many of the original photos and adoption documents have been printed on microfilm and enlarged. When Borshay Liem tapes the microfilm to glass and illuminates them with back lighting, the images appear much more sharply than the original photos that she carries with her throughout both documentaries. This new presentation further gives the impression that the microfilm images are pieces of evidence to be analyzed, thus creating the 2010 documentary's journalistic style and tone.

When placed in context with the film's search for the actual Cha Jung Hee, the style and tone carry the idea that adoptee narratives—and perhaps the adoptee herself—are accumulations of clues that must be properly strung together in order to provide answers. When Borshay Liem explains that she "decided to go [back to the Sun Duck Orphanage] to see what I could uncover,"

the film's emphasis on discovery comes to the fore (*In the Matter* chapter 2). Borshay Liem's two photos serve as both the motivation and a starting point for her search for Cha Jung Hee, the person. The distinct facial features between the girls, in particular, are tangible evidence and justification for Borshay Liem's desire for specific answers about how Kang Ok Jin came to replace Cha Jung Hee in the Borshay adoption. Throughout the documentary, however, the search for answers is met with resistance by those in charge and contains multiple dead ends. At the Sun Duck orphanage, in the scene with the current director, one female staff member, and one female translator (whose affiliation with the orphanage is unclear), an official records book is shown to contain a *third* photo of a girl named Cha Jung Hee, which resembles neither of the two photos that Borshay Liem owns. Although the director seems to concede that there are inconsistent facial features between the two girls in the photos Deann has provided, he is ultimately unwilling to admit that the girls are different people and avers that, "the jaw line is the same" (*In the Matter* chapter 2). In response, Borshay Liem covers her mouth with her hand, but does not participate further in the discussion. Instead, she critiques this moment in the scene that follows, while holding the microfilm image of the original photo: "Over the years, I studied every detail of this single picture of Cha Jung Hee: her rice bowl haircut, the shape of her nose, her mouth. The most distinctive part of her face—the eyebrows—are dark and very close together. This face is so familiar to me it's as if it's my own. Now there is a picture of a third girl who looks completely different" (*In the Matter* chapter 2). Deann's comments draw attention to how, even when faced with evidence that the photos are distinct, then an inexplicable *third* photo, the orphanage director and the two women are unable to acknowledge the duplicitous aspects of Borshay Liem's adoption. To admit the lack of resemblance within and between the photos would make them accountable in Borshay Liem's experiences with loss and potentially

would open them to charges of fraud. But Deann's voiceover also introduces an alternative way of thinking about resemblance that has less to do with shared biology and facial features and more to do with kinship forged by circumstance. These two young girls, one of which is Deann, are linked by a series of events (sociocultural, historical, systemic) and choices (made by adults in their lives) beyond the young girls' control. Deann's affection for and affinity with this young girl, whose "face is *so familiar to me it's as if it's my own,*" is based on the recognition of shared physical traits but without the necessity of being biological related (my emphasis). And yet, although Deann embodies a connection to Cha Jung Hee that carries the associative qualities of shared features, in actuality their resemblance is a byproduct of being subjects constructed by Korea's transnational adoption practices.

The orphanage director and the two women are, at the very least, aware of the weight his responses to the two photos carry. The scene stages the opportunity to watch the orphanage employees negotiate their authority relative to Deann's inquiry. In the background, the female staff member offers in English, [*off-camera*] "Children's faces could change as they grow up…" (chapter 2) The director seems to choose his words carefully, all which are translated in subtitles throughout the scene; however, there is some ambiguity between what the director says and the translator's shortened version:

> DIRECTOR: [*in Korean, addressing the translator who is out-of-frame and not Deann Borshay Liem who is sitting to his immediate right*] I think the facial features look similar, don't you? For me, the lower jaw line and one eye brow is black and darker. [pause] And this one is bigger too. If you take a good look at it, carefully at the small picture [*in reference to the new, third photo*] . . . the eyebrow is very thick.

TRANSLATOR: [*in English*] If you take a good look, the eye brows are same… and uh, the chin line is the same.

DIRECTOR: [*in Korean, with subtitles*] The jaw line is the same. (*In the Matter* chapter 2)

Borshay Liem's lack of direct response to the director and the room's cumulative disavowals, on one hand, represent the authority of his position and the lack of transparency within Korean transnational adoption practices. And her inability to respond while in the room demonstrates how she embodies loss associated with her sense of self and the objects that inconsistently verify her identity. But, on the other hand, Deann's choice to remain passive in the face of disavowal suggests an understanding of herself—once the child depicted in the photos—as an interchangeable commodity within the Korean adoption industry. This is not to say that Deann sees herself as a victim, or defines adoptees as powerless in the face of authority; rather, in this moment Deann is disassociating herself from the child in the photo so that the objectification of the photos—and subsequently, the girls in the photos—is the most explicit aspect of the conversation between Deann, the director, the staff worker, and the translator. Deann the adult adoptee, the filmmaker, understands that she is no longer in the same position as the children in the photos, and furthermore, she is able to separate herself from the young girl in either photo, no matter how much she has studied those faces and their features.

The search for the real Cha Jung Hee gives Borshay Liem a sense of place and connection within contemporary Korean society, exploring resemblance and kinship outside of strict familial roles. After discovering that she is not actually Cha Jung Hee, she recollects, "For a while I, too, pretended nothing had changed. Then, everything fell apart. I became obsessed with home movies and kept going backwards in time…but I couldn't see myself in these

images…I saw a stranger." She then proposes that "if I can find Cha Jung Hee, perhaps I'll be able to locate myself within these frames" (*In the Matter* chapter 3). "I, too" refers to how the Borshay family, initially, did not see the falsified identity to be an issue, and as a young girl, Deann tried to conform to their thinking. Although the voiceover explicitly names "home movies," the scene actually alternates between personal footage of young Deann *and* scenes of Korean society. The camera begins with a scan across a black-and-white photo of Deann in her early twenties, standing next to her brother, Duncan; her sister, Denise; and her mother, Alveen. The family appears happy and comfortable with one another. But "Then, everything fell apart," and we see images of Korean bright billboards and scenes from a Korean film interrupting the flow of home video footage. The disruptive images that accompany the line about finding Cha Jung Hee feature mostly Korean women walking down a city street and pairs of shoes on outdoor, concrete steps. The desire to find herself within the promise of inclusion in "these frames" is no longer exclusively situated within the Borshay family, or her Korean family. Visually, the scenes underscore a desire to position herself within a larger community of individuals and Korean society.

Deann's understanding of herself as connected to a generation of Korean women demonstrates how she continues to develop her sense of self within the larger contexts of multiple histories and nationalisms, including her American relations. In reference to the three women—each bearing the name Cha Jung Hee, but not related or known to one another—featured in the 2010 documentary, Borshay Liem reflects "I was struck by the hardships Korean women have endured through successive generations…I am grateful to the Cha Jung Hees who have let me into their lives. Through their stories I am able to glimpse what my life would have been like if I stayed in Korea. And also see that I am connected to a generation of Korean

women" (*In the Matter* chapter 5 & 7). This connection is certainly less familial and more evocative of a larger sense of kinship. Through these women's experiences—including her birth mother's—it seems that Borshay Liem has found a way to understand the sociocultural conditions of her adoption. But the generational model described—the generation of Korean women—has familial valences, as well as societal ones. Transnational adoption practices construct complicated networks of belonging with multiple flows of connection. Just as the historical and social circumstances of transnational Korean adoption practices have influenced how Deann understands herself within the familial, her experiences with the familial (both American and Korean) have caused to her rethink how she relates to the Korean society.

The search for Cha Jung Hee is a search for answers, but the film reminds us that a material archive can be just as elusive as a psychic one. After speaking with the woman that Borshay Liem believes is the real Cha Jung Hee, Borshay Liem admits: "Many of the facts that I thought were important don't match her history, but my heart tells me: she's the one I've been looking for." Jung Hee recalls that while on a trip with her uncle in Jeonju, she somehow separated from him while on a train and was brought to the Sun Duck orphanage. She remained there for approximately four months before her father claimed her and brought her home. In a later scene, Borshay Liem looks at the microfilm image of the picture from the Sun Duck orphanage records book, with the handwritten label "Cha Jung Hee #1, and explains: "I believe she is the original Cha Jung Hee sponsored by my parents." Now moving to a second microfilm image of the young girl with the dark, heavy eyebrows and the handwritten label "Cha Jung Hee #2, she continues: "After she went home with her father, I think this girl was put in her place. It's unclear who this girl was, but her photo was sent to the Borshays." Standing in front of her own microfilm image, labeled "Cha Jung Hee #3: "Then something happened to her and I became the

third Cha Jung Hee. Cha Jung Hee became a template for a perfect orphan. Once the template existed, any girl could step into it" (*In the Matter* chapter 7).

Although Borshay Liem has located the original Cha Jung Hee, the 2010 documentary must conclude with unresolved questions. As Borshay Liem discusses the orphan as template, she tapes five photos to the glass in two rows. The top row consists of three reprinted photographs of each "Cha Jung Hee: the orphan." The first photo is the picture from the orphanage: the real Cha Jung Hee as a young girl. A picture of adult Cha Jung Hee is placed beneath the first photo. The next photo is of Ok Jin at the Sun Duck orphanage. A picture of adult Deann Borshay Liem is placed beneath the second photo. The last photo in the top row is of the young girl with the dark, heavy eyebrows. There is no adult photo to place underneath and Borshay Liem leaves that space open. Seeing the photos of each young "Cha Jung Hee" side-by-side is striking; it is clearer than ever that these girls are not the same person. Equally poignant is the space left for the unknown girl with the heavy eyebrows.

The arrangement of photos encourages the viewer to focus on the relationship between the young girls and the women. If one were to take a quick glance at the layout, a reasonable assumption would be that these are pictures of daughters and mothers, rather than younger and older versions of the same individuals, bringing to mind the multiple directions of knowledge production possible within generational structures and relationships. The interchangeable position of Cha June Hee, represented by the same label under each young girl photo, references how the Korean orphanage and adoption agencies prioritized the idea of an ideal orphan more than the girls themselves. If Deann were to switch the photos' positions along the top row, entangling the different women's identities, not only would the act visually represent the film's critique against duplicitous adoption practices and the objectification of adoptees within those

processes, but doing so also captures the very contradictions and conflicts of the 2000 and 2010 documentaries that led to the questions, who is Cha Jung Hee? By analyzing the two films together, it's clear that the answer to this question is not a single, or easily contained, one.

But the layout also offers various ways of thinking about vertical connections between the photos, how we read across and between the images of young girls and the older women and imagine connections. Although Borshay Liem meant for the photo layout to underscore unethical adoption practices, she has also created a model for a queer collective of Korean/American women within the diaspora. For example, the black and white photos of young girls each contain qualities consistent with being older photographs, whereas the more recent photos of the older women are more clear, vibrant, and in color. Through this frame, the layout resembles a family photo album; the young girls belong to older generations and the images capture Korea in the decades following the Korean War. Similar to the archival footage of the Korean orphanage shown throughout both documentaries, these images represent the afterlife of Japanese colonialism and the war, products of the Cold War era. To gaze upon the photos of the young girls in this way hints at the circumstances that caused each to be placed temporarily in the custody of the Sun Duck orphanage, while simultaneously invoking the narratives about children's suffering during and following war. To consider how the photos resemble a family photo album is a reminder to how photos help establish a genealogy where one's personal histories are an entry into larger national histories.

But the question of personal histories, of course, is a difficult one within transnational adoption practices and narratives. These photos cannot simply represent the larger national histories because of the adoptee's inability to place herself easily—or with complete certainty—within those historical and national narratives of belonging. Catherine Ceniza Choy makes a

similar assertion in her discussion of *First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* collectively, that the films represent an "inability to recover history in its entirety…only partial stories can be told" ("Global Families" 150). The visual layout of the photos, featuring the self as a child and the self as an adult with an empty space for the third adult photo, specifically pulls forward the histories of transnational adoption within and against the histories of Korea starting in the second-half of the twentieth century. The inconsistencies, gaps, and excesses brought to light via the photos disrupt the Korean postcolonial narrative of success, which has led Arissa Oh to argue that "Korean orphans…could be thought of as a metaphor for Korea itself" (qtd. in *Invisible Asians* 44).

If the Korean orphan is a metaphor for Korea, then unsurprisingly, the multiple Cha Jung Hees represent a network of individuals—in this case, women and girls—constructed from transnational adoption practices. Their connections are intimate, generational, but not biological. Through this feminist network, Borshay Liem is able to access her Korean culture and history by building a nonbiological genealogy that is attentive to the structures, circumstances, and policies that produced the distinct but interrelated subject positions of Kang Ok Jin, Cha Jung Hee, and Deann Borshay Liem.

**Conclusion**

Borshay Liem's films, *First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*, are visual presentations of a Korean adoptee's archive through first-person documentary formats. Using the conventions of the search-and-reunion genre, Borshay Liem is able to structure and organize the objects – the letters, photos, documents – associated with her adoption experiences. Borshay Liem undermines the authority otherwise granted to these objects creating two films that refuse to accept the deceptions upon which her adoption is based. The competing narratives and

dominant rhetoric that circulate within transnational Korean adoption, both in the US and in Korea, complicate Borshay Liem's attempts to make sense of her relationships with these objects and those she would otherwise call family. Through discussions of *First Person Plural*, I have argued that although both the Borshays and Kangs adhere to the liberal narrative that Deann is better off for being adopted, it is particularly disruptive for Deann when Ho Jin announces it on behalf of the Kang family in the 2000 documentary. Realizing that it is not possible to integrate into her Korean family as the daughter or sister that she once was, Borshay Liem explores alternative kinship relations in the 2010 film, *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee.* With an increased understanding how, as an adoptee, she is an archival subject who is produced by the very process she is navigating, Borshay Liem is able to find a feminist network of individuals connected by the sociohistorical circumstances that support the transnational Korean adoption industry.

## CHAPTER 2: COLONIAL DESIRES AND QUEER INTIMACIES: UNSTABLE FAMILY FORMATIONS IN KELLER'S MOTHER-DAUGHTER NARRATIVE

"Indeed, the barely submerged histories of colonialism and racism erupt into the present at the every moment when queer sexuality is being articulated. Queer desire does not transcend or remain peripheral to these histories but instead it becomes central to their telling and remembering: there is no queer desire without these histories, nor can these histories be told or remembered without simultaneously revealing the erotics of power."
*Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath, 2005

"So I begin the search for the female figure that haunts the Korean diaspora, tracing her back through the body of the comfort woman to the body of the home-coming woman, displaced and thereafter always homeless."
*Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, Grace M. Cho, 2008

### Introduction

In the history of Asian immigration in the United States, the formation of the Asian immigrant family in the late-twentieth century is often attributed to the allowances afforded through the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. An emphasis on "family reunification" and occupational preferences, as scholars of Asian American studies have discussed, replaced national quotas, resulting in a "model of *(re)productive citizenship* that harnesses heterosexuality to the productivity of knowledge work to enhance national competitiveness in a globalizing economy" (Koshy 351). Scholarship on Korean migration has placed the arrival of Korean subjects on either side of this particular immigration policy, depending on the role of militarization within analyses of immigration and citizenship. For instance, Mae M. Ngai notes that the 1965 Immigration Act policies were used to meet specific needs, depending on the ethnic or national group, and that "Asians use the preference system to quickly build a base for continued family migration" (*Impossible Subjects* 261). Ngai then uses the Korean war bride as one example to support her claim, detailing how such women were considered "nonquota immigrants" when sponsored by their U.S.-citizen husbands. As a war bride, a Korean wife of a

US solider "could become a naturalized citizen in three years and then bring her parents as nonquota immigrants and her siblings under the fifth preference" (Ngai 261), illustrating a fairly streamlined process that enabled extended family member sponsorship. For others, like Grace M. Cho, Korean migration is rooted in the destruction created by war, which lead to "forced migration of civilian populations, as well as for increasingly frequent sexual encounters between American soldiers and Korean women, some of which led to marriage and migration to the United States, enabled by the War Brides Act of 1945" (*Haunting* 13), situating the Korean war bride on an earlier timeline.

Of course, no single immigration policy can be considered responsible for the entirety of Korean migration; Korean bodies have settled in the United States over the course of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. Lisa Lowe makes a similar point when she claims that the main consequence of the 1965 Immigration Act is that "we have witnessed an enormous widening of the definitions of 'Asian American'" (*Immigrant Acts* 7). She elaborates by explaining that "a majority of Asian Americans are at present Asian-born rather than multi-generation" even though "almost half of Asian Americans are U.S.-born citizens, and of that group, many date the history of their settlement in the United States back four or five generations" (*Immigrant Acts* 7). The continued heterogeneity within the types of Asian immigration and settlement in the US, Lowe argues, represents the role that the US state has played in shaping the lived experiences of Asians Americans through immigration policies and citizenship processes (*Immigration Acts* 7). Building on Lowe's prescient claims, I contend that within Asian American studies, analyses of immigration policies that allow subjects entry into the US must continue to analyze the US state's involvement in foreign countries that directly contributes to migration. Using the example of the Korean war bride and other Korean subjects

within the diaspora, the understanding that not all Asian Americans are multigenerational—that some are Asian-born—acknowledges the presence of refugees and adoptees due to ongoing US imperial and military practices, as well as those in the US for education or work. Additionally, by attributing Korean diasporic family formation to pre-1965 immigration policies, such as the War Brides Act of 1945, or Public Law 97-359, which granted visas to Asian children born to US citizens after December 31, 1950 and before October 22, 1982, an earlier immigration framework not only affirms the heteronormative logics within US citizenship, as Koshy noted, but directly links US imperial and military practices with the formation of families within the Korean diaspora.

As with any Asian family formation influenced by US state-sanctioned practices, the Korean diasporic family helps concretize heterosexual marriage and biological procreation as practices used to determine subjects' fitness for entry and legal settlement in the United States. For Grace M. Cho, this is most apparent in the formation of her own family: her father was a US Navy officer during World War II and later, a US merchant marine who met her Korean mother while stationed in Korea during the 1960s. Cho's *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (2008) is as much a reflection of her own genealogy and the conditions that enabled the formation of her family, as it is a study of the y*anggongju*, a term that "refers to a Korean woman who has sexual relations with Americans; it is most often used pejoratively to refer to a woman who is a prostitute for the U.S. military" (Cho 3). The figure of the yanggongju, Cho argues, causes the Korean American family to be a haunted formation; the histories of sexual violence on the Korean peninsula paired with the subsequent collective, national shame causes silence and secrecy between the first- and second-generations in families like her own. Applying Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's work on "transgenerational

haunting" to the Korean diaspora and Korean American families, Cho's *Haunting of the Korean Diaspora* examines the sexual practices involving Korean women and US military men beginning in 1945 and how resultant traumatic effects unravel within the space of the familial. As Cho argues, heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family are powerful disciplining tools because, "immigration to the United States through marriage represents an opportunity for the Korean woman who is associated with military sex work to shed the stigmas of the past by legitimizing her sexual labor…The war bride…then operates as a figure for the disappearance of geopolitical violence into the realm of the domestic" (*Haunting* 14). Building on Cho's genealogical analyses of the histories of sexuality in the Korean diaspora, I contend that the Korea diasporic family (sometimes referred to as the Korean immigrant family and the Korean American family) is an instable formation, despite and because of its nuclear formations. Characterizing the Korean disasporic family as instable doesn't preclude the possibility of haunting, but enables a broader discussion of intimacies—that emerge from the same conditions that produce the war bride—and the resultant kinships within the diaspora.

This chapter analyzes contemporary Korean American texts that feature mother-daughter narratives to discuss desire and kinship through generational models within the Korean diaspora. Mother-daughter narratives, featuring a Korean immigrant parent and an Americanized child, create important entry points into scholarly discussions about the histories of colonialism and warfare and its effects. Within Korean American novels, the generational model enables scholars to trace "Korean nationalism, Japanese colonialism, and U.S. racism as distinguishable but inseparable linked historical narratives that simultaneously underwrite the production of Korean and Korean American subjectivities" (Chuh *imagine otherwise* 88). In particular, these narratives use figures such as the comfort woman, the camptown prostitute, and the war bride to represent

the political conditions of gender and sexuality under colonialism and militarism on the mothers and the aftermath of these traumas on the daughters. Although the history of the Korean comfort woman predates that of the y*anggongju*, as Cho establishes, when studying the treatment of Korean and Korean American women in the service of colonialism, warfare, and later, nation-building, it becomes clear that the institutional violence that enabled Japanese comfort stations also created the conditions of possibility for the US military camptowns; both depended on the same dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality.

Within the Korean diaspora, the family is a site on which historical narratives converge. But understanding that the family is a site for nation-building and imperialist projects, it's important to consider how the Korean diaspora is also a queer diaspora. According to Gayatri Gopinath, through her study of queerness and the South Asian diaspora, "discourses of sexuality are inextricable from prior and continuing histories of colonialism, nationalism, racism, and migration" (*Impossible Desires* 3). In the Korean American narratives analyzed, the colonial logics that underwrite the sexual practices also produce queer intimacies that offer new approaches to thinking about the first-generation from the second-generation perspective. Cho's genealogical tracing, "back through the body of the comfort woman to the body of the home-coming woman, displaced and therefore always homeless," does not reify biological lineage because an immigrant Korean mother's silence is understood as a part of a larger social process of collective shame in Korea and the diaspora (*Haunting* 96). The incorporation of queer theory to discussions of mothers and daughters in Korean American narratives further releases intergenerational models from procreative logics, exclusively, because "queer desire reorients the traditionally backward-glance of diaspora" (*Impossible Desires* 3). I contend that queer desire not only reorients one's glance and an individual's relationship to the homeland—the mother

country—but also undermines the unidirectional flow often associated with lineage and conception. For the Americanized daughters of former Korean comfort women and *yanggongju*, these converging historical narratives reflect postcoloniality as an "irremediably messy space," to borrow Chuh's phrasing ("Discomforting Knowledge" 16). As such, within Korean American narratives, haunting, ghosts, silence, and loss are not just literary themes, but what remains from trauma, grounded in the sexual histories and social practices of the Korean diaspora and the Korean diasporic family. Cho elaborates further to say,

> Those of us who have literally been born from the U.S.-Korean relationship are not the living proof of harmony across lines of difference as much as we are bearing the marks of militarization…For those who are children of the violent and intimate relationship between the United States and Korea, assimilation is a homogenizing project that is impossible, because we have inherited the traumas that are sent into the diaspora by the yanggongju, and trauma is precisely that which is unassimilable. (*Haunting* 23)

Writing representations of such genealogies, the author of contemporary Korean American literary texts gives voice to the unassimilated child's perspective.

In this chapter, I mobilize analyses of Asian American literature, histories of sexuality and gender, and Korean American diasporic family formations, all of which directly examine the effects of World War II and the Cold War era on Korean American subject formation, to contextualize contemporary mother-daughter narratives written by Korean American women. Through discussions of Nora Okja Keller's novel *Comfort Woman* (1997) and Grace M. Cho's *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and The Forgotten War* (2008), I contend that when queer approaches are applied to Korean American mother-daughter narratives, the

heteronormative and procreative logics in intergenerational models are unsettled and other forms of desire and kinship come to the fore of the narrative. While most critical responses to Keller's *Comfort Woman* focus exclusively on the conflicted relationship between Akiko, the Korean immigrant mother, and Beccah, her Americanized daughter, my approach situates the mother-daughter relationship within the novel's larger queer, diasporic intergenerational model. I argue that the alternative kinships therein reveal new frameworks by which to trace one's relationship to their genealogies and collective histories, offering the potential to break cycles of silence and shame experienced across and between generations in the Korean diaspora.

**Asian American Mother-Daughter Narratives as Bildungsromane**

Within twentieth-century Asian American literary studies, two prominent genres have received considerable attention in discussions about representations of the Asian American experience, and especially with regards to immigration and assimilation. The bildungsroman and mother-daughter narratives are distinct genres with canonical examples that clearly present unique storylines and authorial perspectives and historically-specific experiences with American culture. And yet, within literary studies, scholarship on these genres has similarly focused on the narrative's knowledge production and self-realization. Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*, a study of Asian American novels as cultural objects that represent Asian American subjects' positioning within US national belonging, is regarded as an authority on immigrant family narratives. Citing Elaine H. Kim's foundational *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1992), Lowe locates generational conflict as a feature within Chinese American family narratives, predominantly pertaining to the "question of the loss or transmission of the 'original' culture…between the Chinese-born first generation and the American-born second generation" (*Immigrant Acts* 62). Regarding novels such as *The Woman Warrior* (Maxine

Hong Kingston, 1975) and *The Joy Luck Club* (Amy Tan, 1989), Lowe notes that "one way to read the popular texts [by Kingston and Tan] would be to understand them as versions of this generational model of culture, reconfigured in feminine terms, between mothers and daughters" (*Immigrant Acts* 63), creating a designation so persuasive that scholars and students have trouble reading the narratives otherwise. Indeed, Lowe's argument has helped shape how identity is analyzed within the fields of Asian American literature and culture, convincingly establishing that "[i]nterpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians" (*Immigrant Acts* 63). Lowe's reference to the texts' gendered characteristics does not directly ask the question of why readers and scholars alike consider cultural texts written by women and about women to be consummate examples of Asian American literary generational model of culture, as opposed to fiction written by men or featuring father-son or mother-son models. And yet gender essentialism is threaded throughout the associations of Asian American mother-daughter narratives as generational models about the Asian immigrant family, creating a conflation between immigration, family, and assimilation.

In response to Lowe's call for more analyses of "horizontal" relationship models, as opposed to the "vertical" generational model epitomized by immigrant family narratives, subsequent Asian American literary and cultural scholars have distanced themselves from fiction and memoirs that feature mother-daughter narratives. The result, erin Khuê Ninh argues, is an excessive characterization about immigrant family narratives, especially those written from the daughter's perspective. Ninh argues that "in the very motion that recognizes these [mother-daughter] narratives as forming a prominent genre within Asian American literature, scholarship

has  come simultaneously to dismiss them as texts partaking in a politically devalued, and thus, foreclosed project" (*Ingratitude* 3). The inability to imagine that mother-daughter and immigrant family narratives could substantially contribute to conversations about the political within Asian American literature and culture, I believe, is due to the tendency to read the implications of Lowe's argument through a single lens and an increasingly narrow interpretation of what is politically valuable within Asian American studies. Valuing a text exclusively for its supposed political nature, especially when the political is defined by whether a character remains properly resistant to inclusion without consideration to gendered dynamics provides scholars justification to discard readings of texts—and by extension the texts themselves—that deal predominantly in the familial and characters' roles as mother and daughter, or parent and child.

Arguably, Lowe's assertions are not, in fact, eschewing mother-daughter storylines or revealing how intergenerational conflicts are inherently apolitical, but cautioning against the application of a rigid idea about intergenerational conflict across diverse racialized and ethnic identities. And when contextualized with the central argument from the chapter that precedes, "Canon, Institutionalization, Identity," in which Lowe uses Carlos Buolsan's *America is in the Heart* to explain the risks of reading and assigning meaning solely on the bildungsroman structure to trace a character's development, process, and individual growth, while ignoring the contradictions that arise because the "American *citizen* has been defined over against the Asian *immigrant*" one could interpret Lowe's argument against generational conflict narratives as fundamentally concerned with interpretative practices—as opposed to story lines—that seek national or cultural uniformity, and easy transference, within and between Asian American literature and culture (*Immigrant Acts* 4; 44-46). Although Asian American studies scholars have proffered nuanced and important critiques of structural inequalities and oppression experienced

by Asians and Asian Americans, Viet Thanh Nguyen keenly observes that within Asian American literary studies, "resistance and accommodation are actually limited, polarizing options that do not sufficiently demonstrate the *flexible strategies* often chosen by authors and characters to navigate their political and ethical situations" (*Race and Resistance* 4).

Building from Lowe's analysis of Asian American cultural objects, Patricia P. Chu's *Assimilating Asians* examines Asian American literature through a discussion of Asian American writers and American readers. In order to create a space for themselves within American national literature, and by extension, American nationalism, Chu argues that Asian American writers use the bildungsroman as the "site for imaginatively transforming readers and protagonists into national subjects by erasing or containing their particular differences" and that "Asian American literature reinscribes those differences in an alternative version of the genre, one in which authorship signifies not only the capacity to speak but the belief that speech—or literary representation—is also a claiming of political and social agency" (*Assimilating Asians* 3). The immigrant romance within the Asian American bildungsroman, Chu contends, replaces the marriage plot within the American literary bildungsroman, stabilizing particular aspects of the immigrant family within the bildungsroman narrative, including the "protagonist's search for a white partner to Americanize him or her; the abjection of the Asian mother; the construction of Asian Americans as artist-sons engaged in oedipal struggles; immigrant foremothers, devoted daughter, and postmodernist authors" (*Assimiliating Asians* 19).

Asian American literary texts, Chu argues, must contend with numerous restrictions reinforced by trends in American print culture that reflect Asian American studies' contentious relationship with Area studies about Asian nations and its people. Specifically, "Asian American writers have had to address the dislocations particular to Asian immigration, the average

American's unawareness of Asian American histories and culture, and the deeply entrenched presumption that Asian Americans are not American" (*Assimilating Asians* 3-4). Some scholars, cognizant of the burden for Asian American literature to factually represent its people's histories and cultures through fictional storylines, tend to analyze the writer's choices in accordance to whether a novel meets the objectives of educating the readers. This interpretive framework based on the relationship between Asian American writers and the average American reader certainly applies to how *Comfort Women* has been analyzed.

Scholars of Asian American literary studies interpret the function of Akiko's storyline to be predominantly informative. The effects of the knowledge gained from Akiko's narrative supposedly occur internal and external to the novel itself: first on her daughter, Beccah, and then on the average reader who, positioned similarly to Beccah, is unaware about Korean comfort women. Kandice Chuh argues that *Comfort Woman* "translates the metaphoric into the distinctly pedagogical," which creates "the sense that by gaining possession of the past in the form of knowledge that becomes one's own, the present (self) may be liberated to move past the past" ("Discomforting Knowledge" 13). According to Samina Najmi, Keller's novel critically intervenes in both the bildungsroman and the war narrative, by "simultaneously gendering and 'Asianizing' them, to interrupt dominant feminist and nationalist discourses" ("Decolonizing" 210). Najmi, who cites Lisa Lowe and Patricia P. Chu's scholarship on bildungsromane, presents an argument on form which claims Akiko's story (and to a lesser degree, Beccah's) is remarkable because it decolonizes based on how it's told, not just the story itself. Through a discussion of Akiko and shamanism, Tina Chen is even more direct about how the novel is meant to educate the reader and is successful because the reader plays a role in return. The opening section of Chen's analysis on *Comfort Woman* presents a hypothetical scenario in which

the reader, addressed as "you," is placed in the position of comfort woman and then proceeds to describe the varied ways in which you/young Korean girls are forced to become sex workers during World War II. The interpellation of "you," the reader, in the hypothetical position of a young Korean girl is meant to demonstrate how an "act of identification is so profound" because readers fill an ethical role as witnesses (*Double Agency* 114-16).

In contrast to these interpretations that stabilize ideas about immigrant mothers and Americanized daughters through formal conventions, my reading emphasizes the formation of Korean American families within narratives that use procreative and queer generational models to articulate a relationship between subject formation and the multiple narratives that stem from familial, national, transnational, and diasporic histories. Given the complex ways in which individuals interact with power and culture, it is possible—and necessary—to imagine that Asian American diasporic families produce multiple relational models *and* have multiple ways of interacting with each other and the larger national and transnational cultures in which they exist and belong. In the Korean American narratives I analyze in this chapater, conflict is not simply representative of seemingly opposed cultures, but rather a performance (one of many) by an Asian immigrant family and its members in relation to US histories, cultural practices—including diasporic histories and cultures—and politics. For instance, Akiko's silence in Keller's *Comfort Woman*, is similar to the silence Cho experiences from her own immigrant Korean mother. Beccah, like Cho, doesn't have a full sense of her mother's past because even when Akiko or Cho's mother does talk, sexual trauma doesn't allow the mothers to put their experiences into coherent narratives. Tina Chen theorizes how acts of impersonation reveal the relationship between agency and subject formation for racialized and gendered bodies, reminding scholars of Asian American studies that if identity is constructed, then we must pay attention to

the performative strategies that individuals deploy. She argues that within US race and identity politics, which constrain but are also mediated by Asian Americans, the "complex negotiations between always already articulated roles and emerging paradigms of performance encourages a consideration of how such roles both limit and make possible the emergence of self-reflexive strategies of enactment" (*Double Agency* xvi). The performative in mother-daughter relationships within Korean diasporic families reveals how trauma is experienced across and between generations, as well as how racialized and gendered identities are shaped by the familial. For instance, the effects of trauma can emphasize the social expectations attached to protection and care regarding mothers and mothering, as well as the impact of collective responses to histories of violence on Korean American individuals and families alike.

My reading of Keller's novel and Cho's sociological text considers the impact of desire, as opposed to knowledge, on understanding and accessing one's genealogies. Desire, when coupled with the geopolitical and temporal conditions of the Korean diaspora, helps to reimagine generational models and kinship within Korean diasporic family formations. This chapter begins by showing how Keller's novel is told through the intergenerational model of a Korean mother and a Korean American daughter. The parent-child relationship, literary scholars argue, structures the central conflict of *Comfort Woman*: the Americanized daughter is at odds with her immigrant mother and over the course the novel must learn how to understand her mother and her mother's history in order to achieve a more complete sense of self. But rather than read the mother's traumas as the daughter's inherited legacy, with exclusively essentialist and pedagogical objectives, I analyze the intergenerational model through the queer relationships that emerge from *Comfort Woman*'s Japanese military recreation camps. I first focus the novel's dual narrations and contiguous storylines to denaturalize how scholars of Asian American literature

and culture interpret Asian American mother-daughter models. Using Cho's personal family histories featured in *Haunting of the Korean Diaspora* and her mobilization of transgenerational haunting, I reframe how representations of desire, family, and genealogies operate within Keller's novel.[26] I then analyze how the queer intimacies between the two Korean women of Keller's novel are not only instrumental to Beccah's conception, but also highlight the colonial desires within Akiko's marriage to her American husband, Rick. I argue that the novel's mother-daughter intergenerational model represents the instability of the Korean diasporic family in a few ways. One, Beccah's father, a former US missionary, can only love Akiko through colonial desires. His death, announced early in the novel, signifies the tenuous nature of the Korean American nuclear family. The nuclear form cannot hold when Rick's desires are built upon Korean histories of sexual violence; the mother and the daughter are what remain of a nuclear family built on colonialism and US militarization. Two, Beccah's childhood neglect resonates with Cho's discussions on transgenerational haunting within the Korean American family. Beccah's experiences of instability as a child are a result of the secrecy and shame attached to her mother's comfort woman past and the stigmas of being a version of a war bride. These familial instabilities built upon violence cannot be undone by the novel's queer intimacies, however, queerness can help break the heteronormative logics that ensnarl Beccah's family, even after her father's passing, and potentially release her and Akiko from persistent hauntings of the mother's comfort woman past.

[26] That Akiko's and Grace's mothers are immigrant women and their daughters are American-raised qualify *Comfort Woman* and Cho's essays as intergenerational conflict narratives, despite how Cho's writings about her mother are not based on discord. As erin Khuê Ninh demonstrates through her analyzes of Chinese American immigrant family fictional texts in *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (2011), the term *intergenerational conflict* actually yields a broad-range of logics, reading practices, associative terms, and definitions. And yet, Ninh also notes, despite this range, intergenerational conflict is most often used to reference "families where the parent is a first-generation immigrant, and the parent-child disputes often take on the rhetoric of cultural preservation vs. assimilation, collective vs. individual interests, traditional vs. modern values—whether or not these are indeed the issues truly at stake" (*Ingratitude* 167, fn7).

*Comfort Woman*, Nora Okja Keller's 1997 novel, is a multi-voiced, intergenerational narrative about the complexities of love and affective labor between a mother and daughter. Akiko is a Korean immigrant mother and former World War II comfort woman whose marriage to a US missionary results in her emigration to America and later, the birth of her child. Beccah, her Korean American daughter, provides a counternarrative to Akiko's, describing their shared lives through events from childhood to adulthood. After the death of Beccah's father, Akiko attempted for the two of them to return to Korea but was unable to afford the entire journey. The mother and daughter live with little money and relative isolation in Honolulu during the 1970s and 1980s. The novel's dual narration, voiced in equal parts by mother and daughter, produces a complex representation of their lives together, predominantly characterized by their separation from others and their emotional distance with each other.

As a mother, Akiko loves her daughter deeply and has sacrificed greatly on her behalf, but Akiko also exhibits unstable behavior and acts excessively and erratically in the name of maternal love and protection. Beccah's childhood, as a result, is chaotic and fearful, describing the "nights that seemed to last for days, when my mother dropped into a darkness of her own, so deep that I did not think she would ever come back to me" (Keller 5). I analyze Beccah's childhood experiences and how hers is also a story of survival. In the collection, *Mothering in East Asian Communities,* edited by Patti Duncan and Gina Wong, scholars consider East Asian mothering as always informed by "legacies of imperialism, colonization, war, and militarism; effects of globalization and the labor exploitations of Asian migrant workers; transnational adoption; and mothering in the welfare state within increasingly neoliberal contexts," ("Introduction" 7). As a second-generation child in a family with traumatic histories, Beccah's narrative is produced from conditions of US missionary work and militarism abroad, but also

reflects anti-immigrant sentiment, exploitative labor practices, and issues related to poverty within the US.

In the opening section of the book, Beccah recalls how "At Ala Wai Elementary, where I was enrolled, I was taught that if I were ever in trouble I should tell my teachers or the police; I learned about 911. But in real life, I knew none of these people would understand, that they might even hurt my mother" (Keller 5). What Beccah knows others would not understand is how Akiko is a Korean shaman: she straddles the line between life and death through her ability to commune with otherworldly spirits and the deceased. As her mother's guardian, Beccah is constantly thinking of how to keep Akiko safe. When, for instance, Akiko confesses to killing her American husband, Beccah recalls how her ten-year-old self reacted:

> I don't remember what I felt the day my mother told her me she killed my father. Maybe anger, or fear. Not because I believe she had killed him, but because I thought she was slipping into one of her trances. I remember telling her, 'Okay,' in my loud, slow voice, while I listed in my head the things that I needed to do: call Auntie Reno, buy enough oranges and incense sticks to last two weeks, secure the double locks on the doors when I left for school so my mother couldn't get out of the house. (Keller 2)

On one hand, Beccah is vigilant about keeping Akiko's behavior hidden to prevent the possibility of being taken away from her "crazy" mother; but on the other hand, as a child living with a single mother and no extended kin, Beccah recognizes that she depends on her mother for some semblance of a home and family. It is not until Reno comes into their lives that Akiko's behavior becomes a gift that when monetized, is able to provide the home, clothes, and food that

Beccah requires. Eventually Akiko makes enough money as a medium that Reno can help the mother and daughter move out of their broken-down apartment to a house in Manoa.

Beccah recalls how whenever her mother would cross over to the spiritual world, Reno would supply a steady stream of customers to the extent that "people [were] camping out in our kitchen and living room and out in the apartment hallway, all waiting for my mother to tell them about the death and unfulfilled desire in their lives" (Keller 10). The abilities that threaten to take Akiko away from her daughter are also the skills that enable Akiko to provide for herself and Beccah.

**Mother-Daughter Generational Models and the Geopolitics of the Korean Diaspora**

The novel's immigrant Asian mother and Americanized daughter pairing presents an opportunity to read Keller's narrative structure along the lines of Chu's immigrant romance, which would interpret the miscommunications (including what is unable to be spoken between them) between Akiko and Beccah as representative of intergenerational conflicts and the inevitable loss of culture. As Chu explains, the immigrant family romance within Asian American literature uses supposedly familiar literary forms, such as the marriage plot in American literature, to help the average reader better relate to unfamiliar aspects of Asian American culture, such as the history of Korean comfort women. But rather than approach Keller's novel as a text predominantly intended to teach readers about colonialism and sexual violence, I contend that the novel is a traumatic narrative that aesthetically represents the distinct effects of trauma on Akiko and Beccah. *Comfort Woman's* narrative structure places the mother and daughter's experiences and perspectives alongside one another; the individual sections are labeled, either *Beccah* or *Akiko*, according to whose voice pushes the narration forward. Yet these adjacent narratives do not flow easily from mother and daughter in a linear or progressive

manner. For example, in one section Beccah retells a childhood experience about when Akiko shows up at Ala Wai Elementary and her eccentric, immigrant mother becomes the target of school children's xenophobia. Beccah's classmates make fun of Akiko's manner of speech, and as the mocking grows in intensity, the "children edged closer, howling with laughter at each word my mother spoke" (Keller 87). Beccah experiences internalized racism for the first time: "as I watched and listened to the children taunting my mother, using their tongues to mangle what she said into what they heard, I saw and heard what they did" (Keller 88). Out of shame, Beccah cannot publicly claim her mother and does not acknowledge Akiko's presence (Keller 88-9). In the section that directly follows, a new temporal moment is presented: Akiko is a young mother and Beccah, a newborn infant. The narrative then jumps to a different geographical location, when Akiko lived at the American missionaries following her escape from the Japanese military and her interactions with Rick Bradley, the American who would later become her husband (Keller 91-5). In this sense, the sections resist being read as a single family narrative because they don't share specific events, stem from the same origin story, or retell the same interactions from different perspectives; instead, each woman narrates various stories through a series of flashbacks and recovered memories that lead readers to understand the mother and daughter's lives as proximal and codependent, but also separate.

The novel's intergenerational model, although predominantly narrated as a relationship between a mother and daughter, actually contains multiple timelines and multidirectional relationships, as opposed to a single linearity that flows in one direction from one generation to its successors. The novel's structure, I contend, helps establish the spatial and temporal conditions of the Korean diaspora within the novel. The mother and daughter's narratives create a transnational geopolitical context which begins with Akiko's story and her escape from a

Japanese military recreation camp during World War II, but also extends back to the Korean March First Movement of 1919 and toward the novel's present moments in Hawai'i with Akiko's recent passing when Beccah is thirty years old. In her discussion of Korean American contemporary literature, Kandice Chuh insists that Asian American studies scholars be attentive to "the material effectivity of multiply located histories and chronologies… [which] means recognizing the limitations of knowledge produced by distancing 'America' from 'Asia' as limitations that do ideological work" (*imagine otherwise* 111). As such, the dual narratives enable the story to travel between Korea and the US and between events that include most of the twentieth century.

At the center of *Comfort Woman*'s constellation of historical touchstones are Akiko's experiences as a Korean comfort woman. Notable as one of the first Asian American novels to feature a Korean comfort woman character, the novel was praised for its uncompromising portrayals of the sexual violence for drawing attention to an important, but relatively unknown global women's issue.[27] Keller's treatment of the sexual violence within the context of a mother-daughter relationship has a commanding effect on how the novel is interpreted and the perceived narrative function of Akiko's past. The reader is made aware of Akiko's past from the outset, but her daughter does not discover it until late in the novel. This revelation solidifies Akiko's sexual trauma as a major plot device. The fictional mother-daughter relationship must subsequently bear some burden of translating the Korean comfort woman history to the reader, which leads to the question of history and its role within the novel. For scholars interested in reading *Comfort Woman* as a bildungsroman, or at the very least, a novel preoccupied with epistemology, the publication and reception of Keller's novel represents contemporaneous public discourse on

[27] Michiko Kakutani, "Repairing Lives Torn by the Past," *New York Times*, March 25, 1997, B8; Kathy Lee, *The Missouri Review,* vol. 21, no. 1, 1998, 184-5; Allison Layfield, 67-8.

Korean comfort women. For example, many critics cite Keller's own edifying moment in 1993 regarding the history of Korean comfort women as her motivation for writing Akiko's story and thus, that the author intended the narrative to be interpreted as a fictional testimony.[28]

When read within the context of political activism on behalf of and by surviving Korean comfort woman during the 1980s and 1990s to "break the silence," it *is* likely that Keller imagined Akiko's voice and narrative sections would represent the systematic silencing of the victims by, and a counternarrative to, nationalist histories.[29] According to Chungmoo Choi, following World War II, the Korean women who survived were forced to "live for a half a century carefully guarding their past" while their "existence had been completely erased even in the most fervent anti-colonial, nationalist narrative in Korea" ("Nationalism" 13). Given the postcolonial political and social climates that shamed surviving Korean comfort women into silence, scholars of Asian American studies characterize Akiko's escape from the military recreation campus and later, her refusal to be saved by her husband and his Christianity as

[28] The 1997 Penguin Books edition of the novel features an *Author Questions* section, in which Keller explains her introduction to the Korean comfort woman history: "I first heard of 'comfort women' in 1993. Keum Ju Hwang, a woman who survived the comfort camps of World War II, was speaking at several American universities in order to 'bear witness,' to bring to light this chapter in history" ("Readers Guide" 5). Similarly, in her 2003 *Journal of Asian American Studies* article, Kandice Chuh describes how a formal discussion among Asian American literary scholars is the impetus for her discussion of Korean comfort women: "This essay represents an ongoing conversation 'about' 'comfort women' that for me began a number of years ago at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian American studies held in Scottsdale, Arizona" ("Discomforting Knowledge" 4). Chuh is referring to the 2000 AAAS annual conference. Since 1997, Korean comfort women and their history have a greater presence within Korean American literature, especially following the success of Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (2000).

[29] As discussed by Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, since the 1990s, the effort to make Korean comfort women a part of public discussions about sexual violence and war crimes is the result of Korean women's activism. Those organizing demanded that the South Korea government acknowledge its traumatic past without placing blame on the comfort women, and called for a national apology from the Japan government ("Introduction" 2-3). On December 6, 1991, the Association of Korean Victims, which included three former Korean comfort women, filed suit against the Japanese government, in the Tokyo District Court, using legal channels to control the narrative and lay direct responsibility at the national level (Choi "Nationalism" 13). In December 2015, Japan and the Republic of Korea reached a formal agreement about comfort women: Japan issued an apology and agreed to pay $8.8 million to help support surviving comfort women. In return, Korea agreed to refrain from criticizing Japan for its war crimes and forced sexual conscription and to work towards having the statue removed in from the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The bronze statue, an expression of commemoration and protest, was installed in 2011 by local Seoul artists and activists and features a young girl who sits facing the embassy (Steven Borowiec, *Al Jazeera*, January 29, 2017).

testaments to the character's strength and resilience. On one hand, these aspects of her narrative are easy to champion; Keller seemingly has created an ideal version of a Korean comfort woman who has sidestepped the trappings of perpetual victimhood. But on the other hand, requiring Akiko and her narrative to be both empowering *and* educational creates tension when the novel also supposedly functions as Beccah's bildungsroman.

As readers, we must contend with the limits of the bildungsroman which, to echo Chuh's caution, positions Akiko's "Asianness" significantly distinct from—and sometimes at odds with— her "Asian American" daughter. In her article, "Haunting History," Jodi Kim argues that "through the 'voice' of Akiko's wounds [from sexual trauma], Keller gives us access to a historical truth that has been otherwise occluded and obscured by nationalist patriarchal discourses of Japan, Korea, and the U.S." (63). Recognizing that Akiko is asked to be an ideal comfort woman while also educational, Jodi Kim examines the novel's complicated representations: how the struggle to give voice to certain historical events is represented by Akiko, even as she "breaks the silence" on those very events, thus revealing the limited and incomplete nature of nationalist narratives while offering a feminist critique against the "extent to which nation-building depends on institutional sexual violence" to uphold its patriarchal and colonial agendas ("Haunting History" 73-5). Kandice Chuh, also interested in Akiko's body, claims that Rick, Beccah's father, "serves as a means for this novel to criticize U.S. imperialism" and "in both cases [sexual servitude and marriage], [her] body functions as but a vessel for the desires of a gendered empire" ("Discomforting Knowledge" 18). Chuh ultimately believes that *Comfort Woman* is unable to provide radical interventions, and that "despite its invocations of histories and stories that are arguably unfamiliar to many U.S. readers, the novel may be seen to operate on well-trodden, even clichéd grounds…the critiques *Comfort Woman* offers are

circumscribed by its formal properties such as the importance of the retrieval of this history as ascribed to the desire for happiness for the next (U.S.) generation" ("Discomforting Knowledge" 19). The immigrant mother's narrative, Chuh observes, eventually takes a secondary position to allow the Americanized daughter's chance at one day achieving national belonging. With similar implications, Samina Najmi argues that when Akiko's past is framed through the mother-daughter narrative, the gendered familial roles and dynamics encourage interpretations which focus on Beccah and her sense of self (219). Attaining knowledge about Akiko's past as a former comfort woman enables Beccah to achieve a sense of wholeness and closure because she can now access her Koreanness. The daughter's delayed discovery ultimately ensures the proper transmission of knowledge and history through biological and procreative logics: from parents to child and through successive generations. In this sense, Akiko's comfort woman history is Beccah's birthright, but as Chen argues, only fully comprehensible when the daughter learned how to listen to her mother, a task that had been not initially possible because of Beccah's Americanness (*Double Agency* 147).

I concur with Jodi Kim, Kandice Chuh, and Samina Najmi that the novel's representations of Akiko carry a critique against institutional, patriarchal, and colonial forces. However, I argue that Beccah's narrative draws our attention to the formation of the Korean American family in ways that reorient mother-daughter generational models away from easy formulations that cast the immigrant mother as "Asian" and the daughter as "American." In particular, Beccah's narrative highlights the act of caretaking within the novel and its relationship to kinship and survival within the Korean diaspora. Akiko's tenuous hold on life is a counterpoint to how death is also about renewal, but for Beccah, she experiences her own versions of loss and abandonment. But even as Beccah describes the fear of having an

unpredictable mother, her sense of responsibility regarding her mother's care is profound because she does so in the face of not knowing why: "after my mother tried to drown herself the second time, I realized that our roles had reversed. Even at ten, I knew that I had become the guardian of her life and she the tenuous sleeper…Part of me was aware of each time she turned over in bed, dreaming dreams like mini-trances where she traveled in worlds and times I could not follow to protect her" (Keller 125). The purposeful disconnect between mother and daughter structured by the narrative is not simply a generational conflict which Beccah must overcome so she may become self-actualized as her mother's daughter, but creates space to consider the women as individuals without minimizing one story line for the sake of another.

**The Queer Afterlife of the Japanese Military Recreation Centers**

To understand the significance of Beccah's story means pulling the daughter's narrative from the shadows of the mother's narrative. My intent is not for critical readers to disregard that Akiko and Beccah are mother and daughter, but to release the impulse to read kinship and desire within generational models as exclusively heteronormative and procreative. And while the novel's narrative structure enables readers to reorient their thinking about mothers-daughter storylines by reading their experiences contiguously, it's the queer relationship between Akiko and Induk—a fellow comfort woman at the Japanese military recreation camps—that makes possible multiple channels of desire within Akiko and Beccah's genealogies. Akiko's relationship with Induk originates at the recreation camp, but Keller constructs a bond that goes beyond shared gender, shared nationalism, or even, shared traumas. Induk's comfort woman name is Akiko 40; she is Akiko's namesake ("she was the Akiko before me") and is the person Akiko replaces after Induk is murdered by the Japanese soldiers. Induk and young Akiko create a queer genealogy that plays on different forms of reproduction: their relationship is matrilineal

but also uses the language of replication. On Akiko's "first night as the new Akiko," she was given Akiko 40's old clothes: a brutal symbolism that the responsibilities attached to Akiko 40 have been passed down to the young girl (Keller 21). Through Akiko 40's death, Akiko 41 is born, which is both symbolic and incredibly accurate to the conditions of the recreation camp. (It also needs to be noted that Akiko 40's death enables the return of Induk, whose spirit continually visits Akiko for the remainder of the novel.) Akiko 40's death is simultaneously horrific and mundane, which makes Akiko 41's incarnation devastating for the young girl (and by extension, for the American reader), but unexceptional with regards to the recreational camp. As such, the repetition of names suggests that Akiko 41 is a mere reproduction of Akiko 40, meant to emphasize how institutional sexual violence denies the comfort women their personhood. When Akiko explains that "The corpse the soldiers brought back from the woods wasn't Induk. It was Akiko 41; it was me," (Keller 21) she articulates how the intricate relationship between herself and Induk is formed through multiple iterations of Akiko 40 birthing Akiko 41; Akiko 41 as always already Akiko 40; and Akiko and Induk as one in the same.

In *Comfort Woman*, the relationships between the Korean comfort women reveal how gender can be a tool of resistance in the Japanese recreation camps. Keller uses female solidarity and reclaimed womanhood to redefine Korean nationalism within the space of the camp, a site of extreme patriarchy, colonialism, sexual violence and misogyny. When Akiko first arrives at the Japanese recreation camp at twelve-years-old, she is not immediately placed in sexual servitude but instead tasked with caring for the other comfort women. As an errand girl, Akiko describes her duties with relative innocence: "Still young, I was kept to serve the women in the camps. Around women all my life, I felt almost like I was coming home when I first realized there were women at the camps, maybe a dozen" (Keller 19). The women Akiko initially references, those

she had been "around…all my life," are her sisters and mother. The repeated use of the word *women,* without any qualifiers throughout the rest of the quote, draws connections between her family members (those to whom she is bound by blood and duty) and the comfort women (those to whom she is bound by institutional violence). That connection is strengthened by its inclusivity: the novel's language suggests a potential bond between Akiko and these women merely by the fact that they are all women. Keller does not seem to prioritize biological relations over non-biological relations and indeed, the mere presence of women and the caretaking service required of Akiko initially shields her from the violent realities of the recreation camp. But given the extreme conditions of the camp, female solidarity is more about how the state uses gender as a tool for violence than it is about an essential understanding of comfort women, Korean women, or Asian women more generally.

The youngest and fourth daughter in her family, Akiko's caretaking in the camps resembles her relationship with her Korean mother. On the night that her mother passed away, in a demonstration of filial love, Akiko let her mother's hair down from its bun and rubbed the older woman's temples (Keller 18). The novel creates a parallel when, for the comfort women, Akiko's labor is also characterized with domestic qualities: she "kept their clothes and bedding clean, combed and braided their hair, served them their meals" (Keller 20). The similarities between the different caretaking experiences and Akiko's initial feelings of "coming home" create a familial-inspired kinship amongst the Korean women in the novel. According to Silvia Schultermandl, examples of maternalism are powerful critiques because "Keller inscribes into the mother–daughter relationship [here referencing Akiko and Beccah] aspects of corporeality that articulate women's struggles for survival and agency" ("Writing" 93). Rather than focus on the body, I contend that Akiko's affective, domestic, and filial labor is meant to minimize

imagined contrasts between the space of the home and the space of a military recreation camp, upholding the geopolitical conditions of the Korean diaspora as colonial and exceptionally unexceptional for Korean women. And by presenting the camp and the women through a child's perspective (which parallels Beccah's sections that recount her own childhood), Keller can more easily present the camp as a space where caretaking and attachment are not only possible, but crucial for survival. This is not to say that Keller has fabricated the possibilities of care within a violent space, but she uses the familiar love between a mother and daughter to make legible the comfort women's humanity, even as the kinship extends beyond the familial.

As a mechanism of violence and control, Akiko recalls how the women of the Japanese recreation camps were not allowed to speak, either to the soldiers or one another. It is a clear act of rebellion, then, when Induk uses her voice against Japanese colonialism and the men she was forced to serve, causing the other women to suspect that she had gone insane. She "denounced the soldiers, yelling at them to stop their invasion of her country and her body. Even as they mounted her, she shouted: I am Korean, I am a woman, I am alive" (Keller 20). Unable to force her back into submission and shamed by her words, the Japanese soldiers brutally murder Induk as a lesson to the remaining comfort women.

Induk's condemnations forge a defense on behalf of her body and her nation; her declarations establish claims for herself and in turn, for Korea. She uses her voice to turn herself into a political weapon against Japanese occupation, while fighting against the sexual violence that deems her to be disposable. But even as she reclaims her body, she willingly gives herself over to her nation by reminding the soldiers of her Koreanness: "All through the night she talked, reclaiming her Korean name, reciting her family genealogy, even chanting the recipes her mother had passed on to her" (Keller 20). As long as Induk has a voice, her Koreanness returns to her

body; her Koreanness is then reinforced through the familial and its promise of continuance through generational relations. Here, Keller is redefining nationalism through the Korean comfort women's gendered worth and reproductive capabilities. Citing Elaine Kim, Jodi Kim argues that Keller "refigures…a central preoccupation in Korean history: models of martyrdom and patriotism which are decidedly androcentric. [Elaine] Kim writes that 'in general, the [Korean] state treats female devotion to the nation with ambivalence unless it is expressed through the filter of the family…public displays of female patriotism, then, have not been greeted with unequivocal approval in traditional Korean society'" ("Haunting History" 65). On one hand, Induk's Korean name is a refusal to be identified and defined by the sexual trauma of the recreation camps, and by extension, the Japanese. Her assertions about her family genealogy emphasize how she came from a nation of distinct peoples. Her mother's recipes are shared knowledge and her recitations make evident how that knowledge persists and continues through the generations. Induk refuses to be Akiko 40, and consequently, the soldiers concede by leaving her stall, "some crying, most angrily joining the line for the woman next door" (Keller 20). On the other hand, using a family genealogy to fight colonialism and militarization, even a reclaimed women-centric nationalism, still prioritizes heteronormative and reproductive logics in support nation-building and sovereignty. That Induk calls on her family genealogy as protest, however, does not undermine the queerness of the Japanese recreation camp.

To explore the relationship between queerness, womanness, and nationalism further, I turn to Gayatri Gopinath's considerations from *Impossible Desires*, that "Interestingly, it is often in moments of what appears to be extreme gender conformity, in spaces that seem particularly fortified against queer incursions…that queer female desire emerges in ways that are most disruptive to dominant masculinist scripts of community and nation" (25). The Japanese military

camps produce the conditions for queerness, and especially for the queer female desire that characterizes Induk and Akiko's relationship following Akiko's escape from the camps.

The first time that Induk appears as Induk (as her ghost self; not Akiko 40) within the novel is when Beccah is born (although this is not the first time Induk as Induk appears to Akiko). *Comfort Woman* presents procreation as life-giving; not just in the sense that Beccah is conceived and born, but the act of having Beccah brought Akiko back to life. She explains: "The baby I could keep came when I was already dead. I was twelve when I was murdered, fourteen when I looked into the Yalu River and, finding no face looking back at me, knew that I was dead" (Keller 15). While this reads as a celebration of motherhood, the queerness of Beccah's conception adds another layer to how the novel presents themes of persistence, survival, and the afterlife of sexual violence through normative and alternative kinships.

Akiko's experience giving birth is upsetting because the Western doctors misunderstand her fear and vulnerability. Akiko states, "I tried to protect my daughter from the doctors, from their dirty hands and eyes. I scissored my legs closed, wanting to keep my child cradled within me, safe" (Keller 35). The Western doctors are described as clumsy and dismissive, handling Akiko's body in ways that cause her "mind slip back into the campus" (Keller 35). When Induk appears, she is the lone women's voice in a room of men, taking on the corporeal form of the one of the male doctors to let Akiko know she is there. As with every visit by Induk, Akiko experiences her physically and completely: "She comes in singing, entering with full voice, filling me so that there is no me except for her, Induk" (Keller 36). Their relationship is sensual and based in survival and as such, sometimes needy, desperate, and tinged with jealousy. Akiko reveres Induk: prays to her and sets aside food as sacrifice, eventually teaching Beccah to do the same (Keller 95-6). And even when Akiko does not understand what Induk wants or if she is

worthy enough of Induk's visits, Akiko never waivers in her convictions that the two women are intimately and eternally linked.

It is Induk who helps adult Akiko experience sexual pleasure, as opposed to her American husband, Rick, and it is Induk who is instrumental in Beccah's conception. With Induk as her lover, Akiko's sexual experiences are as much spiritual as physical: "I open myself to her and move in rhythm to the tug of her lips and fingers and heat of her between my thighs. The steady buzzing that began at my fingertips shoots through my body, concentrates at the pulse point between my legs, then without warning explodes through the top of my head…My body sings in silence until emptied, and there is only her left, Induk" (Keller 145). One evening, Rick encounters his wife while she is being intimate with Induk and proceeds to have sex with Akiko. Although to him it appears that his wife alone, seemingly masturbating, Induk is not chased away by Rick's participation. To the contrary, Akiko observes, "it was as if Induk was still there, between us, inside him and inside me. The buzzing that I felt with her unfurled within me, gaining strength until I could not contain it. As it burst over me, I cried out against my husband's shoulder and was answered by his own shout of pleasure" (Keller 146). Beccah is the result of that encounter. For Jodi Kim, who describes the sexual event as Akiko "physically substituting her husband's body with that of Induk," this is Akiko's refusal to be "contained by Western Christianity and the heterosexual economy" ("Haunting History" 67). [30] But it's critically important to understand that Akiko is not "substituting" her husband's body with the idea of Induk, as if Induk's involvement occurred in Akiko's imagination. The sex between Akiko and Induk and Rick involved the three of them equally and physically: "inside him and inside me."

[30] Silvia Schultermandl, in her article "Writing Rape, Trauma, and Transnationality onto the Female Body," discusses Induk at length alongside Akiko and Beccah but can only frame Induk's narrative presence as resistant to patriarch and nationalism (when alive) or as an element of Akiko's Korean folklore and shamanism (when dead). Schultermandl discusses sexuality but in reference to Korean comfort women and violence, rather than queer desire or pleasure.

And arguably, it was Induk who made the encounter possible, because when Rick entered Akiko, she was "slick, made ready by Induk's endless caresses" (Keller 145), objectifying Rick as a mere carrier of semen. Beccah's conception and genealogy are constructed from queer—as well as biological—reproductive practices.

The mother-daughter and queer genealogies come together one last time at the conclusion of *Comfort Woman*. Beccah has put her mother to rest by scattering her ashes in the river near the house Akiko bought with her money earned as a shaman. That night, Beccah dreams of swimming through water and sky, until her vantage point allows her to look down at her physical self to "where I lay sleeping in bed, coiled right around a small seed planted by my mother, waiting to be born" (Keller 213). The novel seems to return to where it began, leaving its readers with the mother and daughter and the suggestion that all Beccah will ever need has already been provided by Akiko. But this pairing of mother and daughter, I am suggesting, is firmly situated within the queer diaspora that includes the kinship cultivated at the Japanese recreation centers and the queer conception that not only included, but required Induk's participation. Literary scholars, in contrast, have assessed the ending as a suggestion for what's to come for Beccah and how this reflects on the novel as an edifying narrative. If we, as readers, can learn just as Beccah has, what then might be the horizon of possibility for justice for Akiko and others like her? Kandice Chuh, for example, describes this moment as "insemination by mother," noting the absence of a male father and Beccah's enlightenment confirmed by the rhetoric of her own (re)birth ("Discomforting Knowledge" 19). For Akiko, the ability to inseminate broadens her reproductive and procreative capabilities, certainly, but I resist interpreting Akiko as an

exceptional mother with concerns that the construction of remarkable mothers requires the categorization of bad, unfit mothers.[31]

**Conclusion**

The Korean diasporic families in Keller's *Comfort Woman* and Cho's *Haunting of the Korean Diaspora* are unstable formations, despite being formed through immigration policies that prioritize nuclear family models and biological procreation. Through the figures of the war bride and the mixed race child in scholarship on Asian immigration starting in 1945, this chapter situates the Korean diasporic family on a pre-1965 immigration timeline to address the role of warfare and US militarization on the formation of these families. Building on Cho's analyses of transgenerational haunting, I use a queer approach to analyze the mother-daughter relationships within *Comfort Woman* and argue that the alternative kinships therein reveal new frameworks by which to trace one's relationship to their genealogies and collective histories. Representations of queer intimacies within Keller's novel have the potential to break cycles of silence and shame experienced by Korean immigrant mothers with histories of sexual violence, like Akiko.

At the end of *Comfort Woman*, rather than consider Beccah as about to be born again, potentially dismissing her childhood experiences because they were produced in ignorance, I argue that this moment is a purposeful backwards look to where Beccah's moment of conception and the queer kinships that helped make it possible. As feminist scholars rightfully champion feminist rewritings of genealogies within the Korean diaspora, a queer reading of Keller's *Comfort Woman* reminds us that histories of sexuality are built through interwoven queer and

[31] Within the context of the Korean diaspora which includes transnational Korean adoption and Korean birth mothers, I am cognizant how the narrative about the unfit Korean mother has been based on ideas of sexual deviance, including prostitution, sexual promiscuity, or being working class and lower. In "The Kinship of Violence," Hosu Kim and Grace Cho argue that "at the heart of societal beliefs about 'unfit' motherhood lies the unregulated sexuality of the birthmother" and that "The notion of excessive and immoral female sexuality, epitomized by the figure of the prostitute, extends to all birthmothers who fall outside the patriarchal family order" (45).

reproductive practices. As such, rather than try to forecast what is about to unfold for Beccah, her dream about a seed “waiting to be born” might be reminding us to continue to look backwards as a way of moving forward.

## CHAPTER 3: THE FANTASY OF A FAMILY: REGULATING DIASPORIC SUBJECT FORMATIONS THROUGH SEXUALITY IN *A GESTURE LIFE*

"Was sexual dominance, then, merely a graphic substantiation of who was on the bottom and who was on the top? Was the medium the message, or did sexual relations 'mean' something else, stand in for other relations, evoke the sense of *other* (pecuniary, political, or some possibly more subliminal) desire?"
*Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power,* Ann Laura Stoler, 2002

"In the late 1940s and 1950s, the issues of Cold War geopolitics and American racism intersected with the burgeoning discourse of family formation. Western culture has a long tradition of imagining East-West relations in familial terms."
*Cold War Orientalism,* Christina Klein, 2003

### Introduction

This chapter analyzes the family narrative within Chang-rae Lee's novel, *A Gesture Life* (1999), to discuss the regulation of sexuality under Japanese colonialism and US Cold War ideologies on the American nuclear family. In the two previous chapters, I have analyzed how the literary representations of the family (its formation and relations within) makes legible the formation of Korean and Korean American subjectivities from conditions related to World War II, the Korean War, and their aftermaths. As such, in my selected texts, the comfort woman and war bride is also an immigrant mother; the child whose conception is attributed to the effects of US military intervention is the Americanized daughter, second-generation or adopted. In those discussions, mothers and daughters are exemplary figures to represent the gendered, sexual histories within the Korean diaspora that produced vulnerable subjects under militarization.[32] Adding to existing feminist interpretations of genealogies, I posit that the nonbiological and queer kinships produced from the conditions of warfare and militarization that helped to

[32] According to Pamela Thoma, with regards to mother-daughter narratives and feminist scholarship within Asian American literary studies, "Generational succession is a compelling trope for Asian American women writers given the social history and ongoing restraints for belonging that mandate heteronormative family formation, participation in global economic wage labor, and responsible self-care for immigrant women" (107).

construct the family within the Korean diaspora significantly complicate textual readings which examine sexuality exclusively through gendered and procreative logics based on heterosexual norms.

The family narrative in Lee's *A Gesture Life* is organized through a seemingly atypical parent-child arrangement, which influences the novel's representations of sexual violence. For one, the intergenerational model is not between an immigrant mother and second-generation daughter, but rather between a single father, the protagonist, Japanese immigrant Franklin "Doc" Hata, and his adopted Korean daughter, Sunny. A former soldier for the Japanese Imperial Amy during World War II, Hata attempts to distance himself from his involvement with Korean comfort women by blindly pursuing a successful life based on American post-war standards. This includes using transnational adoption to fulfill his desires for a nuclear family in a culture that "presented the white, middle-class, suburban family as one of the foundations for postwar national identity, an emblem of prosperous and secure America" (Klein 147). But, significantly, Sunny's adoption by a single parent of Asian descent offers, in Mark Jerng's words, "a different model for narrating transracial adoption" precisely because hers is not a story about the incorporation of an Asian child into a white, middle-class, suburban family (*Claiming Others* 183). And although the circumstances of her adoption do not exactly fit the US Cold War ideologies that promoted the "adoption of Asian children by white Americans as a socially progressive and antiracist act" (Klein 178), Hata's approach to Sunny aligns with the dominant discourse that characterized adoption as a civilizing mission through which families in the US could fulfill their moral and political responsibilities to save orphaned children from communism and their countries of birth. For example, Hata describes Sunny as a "shivering little girl of seven" upon her arrival to the US, but cannot empathize with the child's fears. He instead

encourages Sunny to feel gratitude for her situation, telling her "not to worry or be afraid…that she should be happy to be in the United States and have a father now and maybe a mother someday soon" (Lee 26). On one hand, Hata's idealization of an Americanized nuclear family risks overshadowing the actual complexities of his parent-child formation with Sunny; but on the other, Chang-rae Lee's storylines involving adoption within *A Gesture Life* encourage readers to interrogate the colonial underpinnings and appeals to whiteness within adoption practices, even when the transnational adoptee and adoptive parent are racially the same.

The novel's plot opens with the recently retired Doc Hata, as he's known colloquially by members of his town, preparing to enjoy his twilight years in Bedley Run, a New York suburb. Hata's pursuit of success in America has culminated in material possessions consistent with upper-middle class aspirations. His house is one of the nicest, most admired properties and his successful business, Sunny Medical Supply, has provided more than enough financial support for comfortable living. Using first-person narration, Lee crafts the narrative to depict exactly that which Doc Hata works to project: the story of a contented immigrant who has created simple business success and found stability in the same town for thirty years; a loving, devoted father; and a well-regarded community member who has found acceptance because others recognize his good character. Hata insists, with satisfaction, that "everyone here knows perfectly who I am…in a picturesque town that I will call Bedley Run, I somehow enjoy an almost Oriental veneration as an elder" (Lee 1). But the persona "Doc Hata," is a mask that prevents his neighbors from suspecting his inner turmoil; in truth, internal conflicts and a colonial history threaten to undo the image of an Asian minority living untroubled and prosperously in the US. Moreover, Hata's perspective on his experiences of belonging and successful integration into American society is

meant to raise the reader's suspicions. For instance, when describing Bedley Run, Hata goes out of his way to minimize issues of difference and conflict:

> It was 1963 and from what I'd seen during my brief travels in this country, everyone for the most part lived together, except, I suppose, for certain groups, such as the blacks, or the Chinese in the cities, who for some reason or another seemed to live apart…But wherever I went—and in particular, here in Bedley Run—it seemed people took an odd interest in telling me that I wasn't *un*welcome. (Lee 3)

Hata's tone and language, which Mark Jerng describes as "a little *too* obliging, a little *too* familiar" (183) and Kandice Chuh asserts is "too pastoral to be accepted without question" (*imagine otherwise* 101), express willful misrepresentations of himself and the town. When Hata does acknowledge experiencing a "few small difficulties from time to time," which range from being taunted by local children to the more potentially serious offense of messages written in chalk in front of Sunny Medical Supply, they are described as simply "the play of mischievous boys" (Lee 4). The fantasy of colorblind inclusion, which Hata believes is possible in Bedley Run, prevents him from identifying the actual threats within those instances.

Hata's behavior, such as his tendency to downplay racial conflict or his delight in being a "beloved" member of town, causes teenaged Sunny to accuse Hata of lacking substance and principle: "all you care about is your reputation in this snotty, shitty town…You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness…It's become your job to be the number-one citizen" (Lee 95). Although Sunny's argument uses the language of citizenship and she is correct about his preoccupation with others' perception of him, the reader comes to understand that Hata's desires for assimilation are deceivingly simple. For example, by Hata's own assessment, his integration

is less about belonging and more about disappearance. He reflects, "I do know that once I decided to remain in this country, and to live here in Bedley Run, the question of my status mostly faded away, to the point it is today, which is almost nothing" (Lee 4), suggesting that his is not meant to be interpreted exclusively as an Asian American immigration story. As discussed in Chapter two, the immigrant narrative within Asian American literary studies has a history of being interpreted as a novel of formation in which the protagonist undergoes development toward self-awareness. The "ethnic bildungsroman," as described by Lisa Lowe, is a "tale of the subject's journey from foreign estrangement to integrated citizenship" (*Immigrant Acts* 45). In this chapter, I contend that Chang-rae Lee uses the cultural familiarity of the immigrant narrative as a type of psychological cover for Hata. For one, given Hata's decision to sell his once-cherished house and travel at the end of the novel, it emphasizes how citizenship and assimilation are not main objectives of the narrative. For another, Hata's unresolved struggles with self-awareness undermine the idea that he transforms by the end. *A Gesture Life's* surface narrative is an extension of the mask that Hata wears. Rather than see his attempts at achieving an American nuclear family as a way to absolve past traumas, I posit that Hata's insistence in maintaining appearances is a response to his experiences with sexual violence and queerness.

But even as Hata's narration causes readers to question his reliability, his relationship to choice is significant to this chapter's discussion of sexual dominance and the role he plays in regulating others, like Sunny. In the example from the passage above, for instance, Hata's insistence that settlement within the US is determined predominantly by factors within his control is particularly jarring when coupled with his gloss on race relations and segregation during the mid-twentieth century; or when considered in the context of Sunny, who did not choose to be adopted and sent to the US. But as Chuh notes, "It is not that Hata deliberately

misleads his audience, but rather, that Lee leaves readers unsure about Hata's powers of perception and invites us to question the motives that drive and shape Hata's representations of his life's formative events" (*imagine otherwise* 101). Indeed, the contradictory embodiment that Hata wishes to inhabit—to be accepted and also invisible—is not an essential part of being an immigrant (nor is Sunny's disposition, that she cannot be happy about being in America, innate to being an adoptee), but demonstrates his inability to consider structural and institutional factors (directly influencing, to use Chuh's wording, his motives) that shape his and Sunny's experiences.

This chapter contends that the narrative's central conflict stems from Hata's fantasy of a nuclear family, which is a continual source of pain that he refuses to acknowledge. I frame Hata's heteronormative desires for a nuclear family within larger histories of sexuality and militarization that place issues of kinship at the intersections of US and Korean geopolitical histories, beginning with the Japanese colonization of Korea (1910-1945) and extending across World War II; US military imperialism in Korea beginning in 1945; and American nationalism during the Cold War era (1947-1989). His adoption of Sunny aligns with US Cold War ideologies, and the prioritization of a "traditional" family suggests a strong attachment to American cultural practices. However, I assert that Hata's beliefs about the women in the novel and the choices he makes regarding their sexuality stem predominantly from his childhood experiences with Japanese colonialism. Later, while a medical soldier during World War II, the separate killings of a queer soldier and a defiant Korean comfort woman teach Hata about the fatal consequences of disobeying the social order.

Through flashbacks and recalled memories that flesh out—and contradict—Hata's intentionally idealized story of US immigration, Lee complicates representations of colonialism

by blurring the line between colonizer and colonized with Hata's personal history. What Hata keeps hidden from others is the fact he is ethnically Korean; as a child, he was removed from his family for a Japanese educational project and raised by a Japanese family. His subject formation is masked through a series of effacements that obscure (to himself and those who know "Doc Hata") the layered histories under colonialism. For instance, Hata's full Japanese name is Jiro Kurohata, which he presumably shortened to Hata sometime between his time in the military and settling into Bedley Run. According to Kandice Chuh, Hata's name changes reflect the multiple histories that form his complex and contradictory character: "both Lietenant Kurohata and Doc Hata represent simultaneously colonized and colonizing subjectivities, and neither one completely…this character traces the instability of positions of both power and powerlessness" ("Discomforting" 16). His Korean name, in contrast, is not revealed and its absence represents one of the narrative's many nondisclosures that reflect informational gaps within colonial and postcolonial histories. Although "Doc Hata" is built upon supposed seamless cultural integration and invisibility, Hata's subject formation is constructed through contrasting experiences of being an adoptee and an adoptive parent, a colonized subject and a colonizer.

The instability of the family form within *A Gesture Life* is grounded in Sunny and Hata's relationship, which is estranged at the start of the novel as a result of Hata's willful regulation of Sunny's sexuality through normative, gendered family roles and expectations. But to fully understand Hata's anxieties about Sunny and creating a family, it is important to consider two additional characters who are formative to Hata's colonialist beliefs: Corporal Endo, a fellow Japanese solider and a queer figure stationed at the Japanese military outpost with Hata; and Kkutaeh, or K as she is known throughout the narrative, a Korean comfort woman whom Hata believes he loves and can "save." In Chapter Two, I argue that the relationships between the

Korean comfort women in the Japanese military "recreation centers," in Keller's novel, create queer afterlife that reframe genealogies. Similarly, Lee's Corporal Endo is a figure whose queerness emerges from the same sexually violent and rigidly gendered circumstances. Endo's behavior regarding the Korean comfort women is characterized by his peers as abnormal, based on his inability to conform to the expectations of his gender and nationality. The two women of the novel, Sunny and K, are affected by the implications of Endo's queerness as witnessed by Hata, whose subsequent choices strictly uphold the heterosexual norms managed by colonialism.

In *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, Ann Laura Stoler analyzes the role of sexual dominance under Dutch colonialism in the East Indies at the end of the nineteenth-century and into the early-twentieth century. Stoler argues that sex, under colonial rule, is a tool that helped construct and uphold the categories *colonizer* and *colonized* (42). The family under colonial rule, subsequently, aided the management of sexuality and sexual relations between the colonizer and the colonized; simultaneously, procreation continued to be understood as an extension of the nation-state, depending on whether children fathered by Dutch colonizers could be considered a Dutch national subject or not. Marriage and family, Stoler asserts, acted as a center around which various forms of sexual practice were organized and categorized, perpetuating a sense of rigid codes even when sexual arrangements under colonialism resulted in mixed race children who threatened to complicate the very distinctions between colonizer and colonized (*Carnal Knowledge* 63). The resultant increased anxieties of racial purity and European lineage encouraged eugenic logics and practices. According to Stoler, the framework by which the family under colonialism is understood is, thus, quite elastic: sexual dominance and practices lead to increased formations of the colonial family, but also influenced how those family formations were defined and understood. In *A Gesture Life,* adoption practices significantly

contribute to the formation of the family involving Korean subjects by extending the incorporation of children to include those who are not biologically related. Sunny, in particular, as a mixed-race Korean adoptee, also represents the colonial ideologies that Hata uses to justify his treatment of women.

Through an analysis of Hata's time as a medical soldier during World War II and his experiences with sexualized violence through his relationship with Corporal Endo and K, I have been suggesting that Hata's adherence to heteronormativity is a series of choices. Using queer theories of intimacy and late-capitalism's influence on family, such as Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism and David L. Eng's discussion of queer liberalism, I theorize that Hata's active role in regulating Sunny's sexuality, culminating in his decision that she receives a dangerous late-term abortion at nineteen, is not exclusively representative of his position and privilege as a heterosexual Japanese man but also indicative of his misguided aspirations to live "the good life," defined through a combination of Japanese colonial and American post-war standards. When Sunny cuts him out of her life, making it impossible to be the very patriarch he strives to be, Hata is unable to achieve a sense of national belonging, which is imperative after witnessing Corporal Endo's death sentence under the charge of treason. As such, the intergenerational parent-child relationship within Lee's novel enables scholars of the Korean diaspora to ask: how does vulnerability transmit between generations, and across gender lines, in the absence of biological lineage? What is the significance of the family within the Korean diaspora when queer desire is both the product of and threat to colonial eugenic practices?

Bringing together discussions of sexual violence under colonialism to discuss sexual regulation within the family, I use queer theories to analyze the formation of Korean and Korean American subjects through gendered experiences of sexual norms. As such, the chapter begins

with a discussion of Hata as an unreliable narrator, a formal technique which allows Lee to reveal the cracks in the persona, "Doc Hata." By focusing on Hata's *insistence* on a nuclear family as an entry point into deeper, overlapping geopolitical histories, I reframe Hata's subject formation through his experiences with colonial adoption and the military, shifting the role and implications of US immigration and assimilation within the narrative. The type of family that Hata *desires* to create with Sunny, as well as his attempts to be a "proper" father figure and his insistence that she require a mother and a two-parent household to be well-adjusted, therefore, is an extension of the sexual dominance of Korean comfort women, of which he was complicit, during WWII. The type of family Hata *actually* creates with Sunny, however, reveals how institutions within the Korean diaspora, specifically the family and military, forge connections between distinct sexual histories through gendered intimacies and kinship.

This chapter offers a framework of analysis that situates the gendered and sexual violence experienced by Kkutaeh *and* Corporal Endo in relation to Hata and Sunny's relationship, as opposed to an analysis built exclusively around K, Hata, and Sunny. The Oedipal triad of K, Hata, and Sunny, upheld through the fantasy of a nuclear family and the misguided romantic love that Hata can "save" both K and Sunny, would otherwise exclude or greatly minimize Endo's queerness within a discussion of sexual regulation by the state. Therefore, I argue that the production of norms within *A Gesture* Life, initially created by colonial logics and militarization and then sustained through US Cold War ideologies on the nuclear family, queers both Endo and Sunny. Although each experience queerness differently, due to gender and the normative expectations on men and women's roles within a heterosexual society, they are both constrained and made strange by the Hata's blind faith in normativity. Furthermore, Endo's queerness and his subsequent execution haunts Hata, shaping the novel's parent-child relationship by

transferring vulnerability across gender lines and between family members who are not biologically related.

**"A Purposeful Society": The Role of Family under Japanese Colonialism**

Hata's fears about Sunny's sexuality, during her teen years, convey his complicated experiences with gendered sexual violence. He reflects how "in admonishment, I mentioned to Sunny what could happen to young women who strayed from the security of their families, how they would inevitably descend to the lowest level of human society and be forced to sell every part of themselves, in mind and flesh, and spirit" (Lee 144). When Sunny pushes for a deeper explanation, Hata mentions the Pacific War quickly and in vague terms. He instead steers the conversation toward his concerns about Sunny living in the city, "where girls are tricked and abused" (Lee 145), as opposed to Bedley Run. Although he was asked about the war and what he witnessed, Hata cannot verbalize the colonial conditions that created military prostitution and sexual conscription; instead, he attributes any harm experienced—whether during wartime or in a US city—to be caused by an imagined, inherent vulnerability related to female sexuality. That the family is a site which protects young women from their own sexual vulnerabilities by upholding gendered and sexual norms, all for the sake of a strong society, is a sound line of reasoning to Hata. Raised by a Japanese family, Hata believes the colonial education project during his childhood was rewarding and allowed him to experience "the comforts of *real personhood,* and its attendant secrets, among which is the harmonious relations between a self and his society" (Lee 72, my italics). But in actuality, Japanese colonial rule over Korean subjects was not about opportunities of growth and social responsibilities. And the fact that Hata interprets himself through the public gaze of Japanese society is exactly the outcome imperial projects work towards. As Kandice Chuh summarizes, the colonial educational projects that

shaped how individuals like Hata saw themselves, also created the structural conditions that made more explicitly sexualized projects, like military comfort stations, possible:

> Japanese occupation meant among other things the dismantling of educational systems that had been in place in Korea, the prohibition of the use of Korean language in public, and the conscription of young men for military service. Students in the newly established educational system under Japanese rule were taught to see themselves as Japanese subjects. The ideology underwriting Japanese colonization of Korea depended upon and offered understandings of the latter as a "backward" country in need of civilization, which was effected by the imposition of Japanese educational and political systems. Such an understanding of Korea, in combination with the demands for inexpensive labor that conditioned a pattern of exploitation of peoples on the peninsula for Japanese economic needs, precipitated the practice of military sex slavery. ("Introduction" 3)

As such, rather than refer to himself as adopted, or a colonial subject, Hata sees himself the product of a "purposeful society," and that his upbringing is owed to "really nothing and no one else" (Lee 73). The family who adopted Hata, the Kurohatas, "a prominent family," is described within the narrative as a site of belonging fully accessible to Hata (psychically or emotionally); but as a colonial subject conditioned by national educational program, Hata still felt he is reliant on the state and indebted to his Japanese parents. He explains, "I was more than grateful. And I knew even then as a boy of twelve how I should always give myself over to its [society's] vigilance, entrusting to its care everything I could know or even hope for" (Lee 72-3). As a child, Hata found a way to see himself as a Japanese subject, not because he saw himself seamlessly integrated into the Kurohata family, but by trusting the entire colonial project as a civilizing

process that provided him the chance to succeed, as opposed to "the narrow existence of my [Korean] family and our ghetto of hide tanners and renderers" (Lee 72). This is how Hata learned how to be loyal to the very system that colonizes him.

Hata expected Sunny to feel the same degree of gratitude regarding her adoption, that "at least she'd be somewhat appreciative to the providence of institutions that brought her from the squalor of the orphanage—the best of which can only be so happy—to an orderly, welcoming suburban home in America, with a hopeful father of like-enough race and sufficient means" (Lee 73). Through Hata's unquestioned colonial logics, *A Gesture Life* makes a compelling case that the intimacies and relations created by the family have the capacity to not only uphold, but reproduce, the conditions of colonialism and state-sanctioned violence. Adoption, in particular, is framed as a form of nonbiological kinship that reinforces the family as a tool of colonialism. As such, Sunny's fears about a Japanese mother are responses to Hata's commitment to Japanese nationalism and its colonial values. Throughout the novel, because he never discloses to Sunny that he is Korean or that he, too, was removed from his family and culture, his faith in the institution of family and high regard for the country whose institutional oppressions have ensnarled them both, caused the young girl to fear that her new American family is nothing more than a replication of the colonial and military conditions that she left behind in Korea.

Franklin Hata's persistent denial perpetuates his skewed outlook and recollections throughout the novel. On one hand, Hata seems so deeply engrossed in his Doc Hata persona, that he cannot allow himself to reflect honestly on his relationships with the women in his life. Yet on the other hand, readers are reminded time and again that Hata's tendency to deceive is a well-practiced choice. The novel's first-person narration, furthermore, forces the reader to pay particular attention not only to what Hata says that is misleading, but also how he justifies

himself. For instance, the reader is introduced to Sunny through a series of lies. When a townsperson, Mrs. Hickey, asks Hata about photos that include him and Sunny as a child, Hata does not claim her as his daughter, but instead states that Sunny is from Japan, had stayed with Hata temporarily for schooling, and has since returned (Lee 13). The reader doesn't realize this information is untrue—Sunny is actually his mixed-race, Korean adopted daughter—until Hata admits the falsehoods to himself after the interaction ends: "I wished I hadn't spoken inaccurately about Sunny to Mrs. Hickey, but the moment, like so many others, passed too swiftly, as I didn't feel I could explain things without further complication and embarrassment" (Lee 14). Although Hata seems to acknowledge that he shouldn't have lied, the phrasing is odd. To say that he had "spoken inaccurately" comes off as an understatement, especially considering he and Sunny are family. And to justify his choices through the supposed rushed nature of the interaction and furthermore, that his lies stem from imagined politeness, reveals how social propriety has become a convenient excuse for Hata to choose dishonesty when it isn't necessary.

An unreliable narrator, one of Hata's main convictions is that he has achieved complete assimilation into American small town living, obscuring his past as a Japanese soldier and other aspects of his life prior to immigrating to the United States. Rather than consider the immigrant narrative within *A Gesture Life* to be a holistic representation of Hata's lived experiences in the US, I assert that Lee uses the immigrant narrative as a formal technique to characterize Hata's narration as unreliable. With its familiar tropes of arrival, settlement, and assimilation, the immigrant narrative is a screen that prevents the Bedley Run townspeople (and to some extent, the reader) from being privy to the colonial experiences that shaped Hata many subject positions. Additionally, Lee seems to suggest that the ethnic bildungsroman, as a genre, is always already unable to properly convey the psychic and political complexities of a subject like Hata, and as

such, the immigrant narrative structure in *A Gesture Life* collapses easily under Hata's many lies and denials.

The story of Doc Hata, whether accurate or not, nonetheless contributes to the novel's byzantine representation of US immigration and histories of colonialism and warfare within the Korean diaspora. According to Chuh, Hata's intricate narrative is meant to represent the "transnational conception of the lurching, sometimes irascible processes of subject formation that directly undermines the unilateral seamlessness of the immigration narratives forwarded by U.S. nationalism" (*imagine otherwise* 90). Similarly, Hamilton Carroll argues that *A Gesture Life* "cannot be understood as a bildungsroman proper because, despite Hata's attempts to replicate the form through his first-person narration, the novel becomes a traumatic narrative that consistently displaces Hata's tale of successful assimilation" (593). For other scholars, the traumatic aspects of the novel greatly influence how readers should characterize Hata's desires for inclusion in American nationalism. Anne Anlin Cheng, for instance, asserts that Hata's narrative reflects a lifetime of "donning various forms of camouflage…[and] In this text, 'passing' appears not only as a social gesture, but also as a psychic process that infuses daily life" ("Passing" 558). Similarly, Lisa Yoneyama asserts that "transnational minorities' memories are never fully in alliance with the dominant national history and memory, yet they are constantly imperiled by nationalizing forces that, through domesticating and assimilating excess knowledge, threaten to produce a seamless narrative of national self-affirmation and innocence" ("Traveling Memories" 82). For each of these scholars, the US-based immigrant narrative that Hata works so hard to construct and project has political implications that are most apparent when the novel's colonial and wartime events unfold in a nonlinear fashion, undermining the figure Doc Hata, and his supposed achievements. The implications of such readings, I contend, is

that Doc Hata is considered a prop, and as such, that particular narrative intentionally crumbles to represent the potent effects of historical traumas on one's psyche and subject formation, as well as the inability to uphold rigid boundaries between "here" and "there" due to the geopolitical conditions of the Korean diaspora. I build upon these points by specifically addressing how Hata's fantasy for a family has tangible consequences and brings particular histories of sexuality to the fore of the novel. My interventions remain consistent with the interpretations that Lee has purposefully written Doc Hata to be a figure that readers and scholars should critique because of his involvement with Korean comfort women during WWII. Arguably, to fully address Hata's treatment of women in the novel, attention must be given to his choices regarding family building—including adoption practices—within a post-war, US context.

**The Fantasy of a Family**

Franklin Hata is largely motivated by the desire for the type of family that "would soon be well reputed and happily known, the Hatas of Bedley Run" (Lee 204). Significantly, his fantasy is not just for a family, but to enjoy the esteem of having a family that has earned its moniker, *the Hatas of Bedley Run*, by acquiring a wealth of social capital applicable to his town's standards. As previously stated, Hata is unable to fully recognize how his aspirations for a nuclear family with Sunny are a continual source of pain for them both, and yet he persists for the duration of her childhood. Such scenarios prompt Lauren Berlant to ask, "Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?" (2). With regards to Hata, Berlant's question draws attention to how instability is produced through essentialist ideas regarding gender and sexuality

within Hata's desires for a family, as well as the conditions of militarism that enabled him to create a family with Sunny through adoption and later, his attempts to secure a nuclear family with other women in the novel.

Through descriptions of the type of family he desires, Hata cannot help but reveal the extent to which having a family hinged on Sunny. For instance, he explains his intentions "to make my own family, and if by necessity the single-parent kind then at least one that would soon be well reputed and happily known, the Hatas of Bedley Run" (Lee 204). Her adoption, when interpreted through Berlant's cruel optimism, directly supports his "attachment to a significantly problematic object" (*Cruel Optimism* 24); in this case, a family of his own. Ensuring future respectability, according to Hata, would have meant receiving a "child from a hardworking, if squarely humble, Korean family" but then he cynically states that he "should have known that he or she would likely be the product of a much less dignified circumstance, a night's wanton encounter between a GI and a local bar girl" (Lee 204). Lee does not disclose the specifics of Sunny's parentage, undermining Hata's prejudices; but Sunny is indeed a mixed-raced Korean adoptee. The novel is referencing the US military camptowns in Korea during and following the Korean War, which created conditions that regulated particular subjects—Korean women military sex workers and their biracial children—through sexual practices.[33] Hata's displeasure regarding sexual relations as a result of US militarization exposes his eugenic ideologies, specifically that her mixed-race features prevent his "colleagues and associates and neighbors"

[33] Hosu Kim and Grace M. Cho trace the origins of contemporary transnational Korean adoption back to US military presence in Korea beginning in 1945. The advent of mixed-race children, the product of US soldiers and Korean women throughout the 1950s, were seen as a "social problem" and "living proof of South Korea's compromised sovereignty for having established itself a dependent of the U.S. military" (*Kinship of Violence* 37-8). In the timeline of the novel, Hata likely adopted Sunny in 1970s, or early 1980s, easily enfolding her within the cultural legacy of the US camptowns and the actual programs promoted by the South Korean government that targeted biracial children for adoption. Kim and Cho, in establishing the camptowns as foundational to transnational Korean adoption, also outline the overlapping effects of colonial eugenic practices, South Korea's early nation building, and the beginnings of contemporary transnational adoption in a newly postcolonial society.

from upholding the narrative that Hata and Sunny are "of single kind and blood" (Lee 204). Reproductive logics and resemblance based on biology limit Hata's conceptions of what counts as family. He requires a child in order to be a parent and only through parenting can Hata have a family. Such intergenerational models, David L. Eng argues, are built from "structuralist accounts of kinship underwritten by the dominance of the Oedipal complex," and that normative language functions by "privileging certain forms of kinship as the only intelligible, communicable, reproducible, and livable ones" (*Feeling of Kinship* 15-6). His choice to adopt suggests that although Hata had resigned himself to the acquisition of a child through non-biological means, the supposed visual incongruity between himself and Sunny ultimately prevent him from accepting her as his own. Thus, Hata's ambivalence about the history of colonial and state eugenics within Korean adoption demonstrates how the very conditions and practices that helped make his family also prevents him from achieving what he considers to be an acceptable family.

As such, *A Gesture Life*'s family narrative is comprised of figures framed through and narrowed by the heterosexual norms and the social expectations of the US nuclear family and its roles. With Sunny, Hata relies on traditional family roles to structure their relationship, despite how there are other points of connection involving their sociopolitical circumstances that could orient the two in relation to one another differently. But as a colonized subject who later experiences a degree of power during his time as a medical soldier for the Japanese Army, for Hata, the question of "[h]ow to be a good soldier and how to be a good citizen and father begin to acquire similar psychological significance and risks" (Cheng 563). Hata's choices reflect the belief that if he adheres to the most normative and acceptable forms of social relations and behaviors, he would survive the oppressive systems that created him. As a result, the novel's

Oedipal family roles (father, mother, child) are based on the same gendered and sexual norms that regulate state institutions, such as education and the army. When Hata's attempts at securing a wife are unsuccessful and Sunny leaves home at 17-years-old, Lee's protagonist is left with his memories and the consequences of his choices. Anne Anlin Cheng also discusses the significance of choice in relation to Hata and the women of the novel, arguing that "the connection between the past the and present is not just Hata's psyche in some general sense but specifically the ongoing series of embedded and contradictory identifications that have haunted Hata—a crisis that was evoked by and materialized in the critical encounter with K" ("Passing" 563-4). Cheng goes on to describe Hata's relationship with Sunny as "not an echo but a *continuation* of a series of lifelong psychic struggles," which includes his questionable decisions supposedly made on behalf of K during the war ("Passing" 564, original italics). This, in combination with Hata's declarations of love for K, seems to place Hata, K, and Sunny in an Oedipal triad, as though Hata and K's relationship made Sunny and her adoption possible. But just as Cheng's phrase, *continuation*, is not meant to evoke the logics of procreation, my discussion of Hata's tendency to frame issues of gender and sexuality through normative constructions creates space to discuss how the family functions queerly within *A Gesture Life.* According to Eng, "Queer diasporas fall out of normative Oedipal arrangements precisely by carving out other pathways of displacement and affiliation, by demarcating alternative material structures and psychic formations that demand a new language for family and kinship" (16). I contend that a discussion of Hata's version of the ideal family brings Corporal Endo to the fore of a discussion about histories of sexuality within the Korean diaspora, as opposed to a discussion spearheaded by a specifically gendered figure, such as the Korean comfort woman or the transnational adoptee. As a queer figure, he helps construct the Korean diaspora within the

novel as a queer one. But given the centrality of the family narrative within the text, he is often overlooked in scholarly discussions about sexuality and vulnerability within the novel. Consequently, the fantasy of a family queerly connects the women of the novel while marking the absence of Corporal Endo. The remainder of the chapter traces those queer effects across the gendered and sexual geopolitical conditions of the novel, including colonial eugenic practices, military prostitution and comfort stations, and adoption, to get a sense of how vulnerable subjects are created within the diaspora.

Hata's accidental house fire that damages his family room is a turning point early in the narrative. Although the novel opens with Hata prepared to enjoy his retirement, he is surprised to find himself uneasy in the home and life he worked tirelessly to build. He isn't able to pin-point exactly what is bothering him, but Hata nonetheless observes that "this happy blend of familiarity and homeyness and what must be belonging, is strangely beginning to disturb me" (Lee 21). The house fire's location, the family room, is especially heavy with meaning: the room intended for the noisy life of family has been long-abandoned in the Hata house. And just like the unused room, all of Hata's paternal ambitions have been sealed off and unfulfilled. He initially plans to have a small fire in the fireplace, but it gets out of hand because Hata rashly decides to add old documents to the flames (Lee 24). The fire burns uncontrollably because Hata is too distracted thinking about Sunny's adoption, how she hated the house while growing up and their current estranged relationship, reiterating how Hata places Sunny at the center of his larger ambitions about family (Lee 25-30). And just as the fire and smoke tarnish the family room, the very space meant to celebrate his familial aspirations and successes, Hata cannot continue to ignore how his past choices are threatening the façade of his idyllic life (as it appears from the outside). Franklin Hata's relationship with Mary Burns, a Bedley Run wealthy white widow,

during Sunny's childhood, is the closest he comes to finding a prospective wife and mother-figure.

Despite his strong motivations to provide a two-parent household for Sunny, Hata proves unable to uphold his side of an intimate relationship with a woman considered his peer in most regards. Their relationship seems like a good match: Mary is well-respected, attractive, principled but kind, and willing to build a family with Hata and Sunny. She could easily help create the nuclear family that Hata claims to want. But when his friend, Renny Banerjee, inquires about that relationship, Hata's recollections are decidedly detached: "And yet as much as I happily recall those moments [with Mary], there is an unformed quality to them as well, as if they were someone else's memories and reflections, though somehow available only to me, to keep and to hold" (Lee 41). Although it is never stated outright, the reader comes to understand that Hata is responsible for the relationship's demise: he was unable to allow things to develop, and rather than build intimacy over time, Hata acted more distant and circumspect with Mary. When the opportunity to properly fulfill his role as potential husband and father is available to Hata, his experiences with trauma and sexualized violence undermine his actions.

Hata does not reflect honestly upon his relationship with Mary, or acknowledge that he worked against the exact thing he claimed to want. Instead, Hata uses the inability to acquire a wife and mother as justification for Sunny's behavior during her late teenaged years, and then later, to explain away his broken relationship with his daughter when she is an adult. His gender normative beliefs that Sunny would thrive under a mother's care allow him to mischaracterize his daughter's needs and development. He recalls how he "began speaking to Sunny about the possibility of her having a mother; I suggested that with a woman living with her, perhaps she would be happier, or at least less inexplicitly agitated and anxious-feeling than she was, which it

seemed was becoming an increasingly everyday condition" (Lee 51). Hata could only understand her emotional distress as a byproduct of having one parent, reifying his gender essentialist ideas that a woman could provide guidance and support that a man cannot (Lee 51). There exists no consideration about how being adopted and its related losses might shape how she responds to Hata's insistence on creating a brand-new family out of relative strangers; instead Hata blindly adheres to the gender normative belief that a daughter requires a mother to be healthy and thrive.

His initial plan for a mother for Sunny, before meeting Mary Burns, meant bringing a Japanese woman to the US: a "suitable woman" he planned to find "through old friends back in Japan, depending on a small network of comrades from the war for a reputable contact" (Lee 51). His repeated assurances that he would only use respectable channels, that she would be "a suitable woman" and he would use "a reputable contact," conveys Hata's insecurity about propriety. To his fellow townspeople, his preference for a Japanese woman would appear consistent with his persona as the venerable Japanese immigrant elder of Bedley Run: of course Doc Hata would want a woman from his own country as his wife and mother to his child. However, Hata's concerns for a "suitable woman" are not about his marital needs but the characteristics he deems appropriate for the mother of his child. His priorities, thus, are not regarding shared nationality, but whether or not the women would be an appropriate role model and mother figure for Sunny. Hata's plan for a Japanese woman is significant because it establishes how Hata's process of disciplining Sunny's sexuality began long before she understood herself as a sexual being. Furthermore, his gender essentialist beliefs that daughters need mothers is threaded throughout his talk of a nuclear family, but his insistence that she be a Japanese woman "of good background" (Lee 51) takes on the rhetoric of eugenics and how sexuality and reproduction are tools to uphold imperialism and nationalism. In her father's mind,

the role of parenting is to "help a wayward child develop into a productive member of the community" (Lee 67) and Sunny's adoption status makes her especially in need of a nuclear family. Through the persistent mindset that a proper mother figure for Sunny is one who would help mold his daughter's eventual sexuality into the respectable channels of motherhood and familial responsibilities, Hata therefore believed that a *lack* of mother figure is tantamount to "allowing someone of essentially decent nature to become an adult whose social interactions are fraught or difficult, or even pathological, criminal" (Lee 67). Sunny's sexuality must be properly regulated within the family, which serves as an entry point into society.

As an important counterpoint, Sunny's response to the prospect of a Japanese mother, being "vehemently against the idea, crying and going on whenever [he] persisted," reminds readers that Hata and his daughter's experiences with colonialism and sexuality are not symmetrical. Girls and women are often the targets for state-sanctioned sexual violence within the Korean diaspora. In fact, respectability provides a moral position that allows Hata to overlook the social and political circumstances of bringing a Japanese wife to the US—that he would have to pay for her, just as a he has already purchased a child, or that women experience the institutions of marriage and family distinctly from men—to satisfy his needs to create a family.

**Sexuality and Vulnerable Subjects in the Korean Diaspora**

Hata's beliefs in heteropatriarchy took form during his time in the military as a medical officer for the Japanese Army during World War II. The military's treatment of sexuality causes Hata to form a skewed understanding of heterosexuality. I contend that Hata translated these systemic values into paternal ambitions, reframing how he thinks about family and himself as a potential patriarch after WWII. Whereas his adoptive family, the Kurohatas, had previously been

a site of practiced indifference for Hata, the military, on the other hand, is a space he could belong because of his already established loyalty to Japanese society. By entrusting in the military's authority, as he learned to do with Japanese society as a boy, Hata is primed to accept unconditionally the ideas about normative gendered expectations perpetuated by military and colonial societal structures alike. Thus, within *A Gesture Life*, the military and society and family are not wholly distinct social spheres. There are degrees of separation and circumstance, certainly, but the military, society, and family spheres within the novel also inform one another, structurally uphold each other, and share values.

According to Hata, the military is a system of discipline, order, and absolute objectivity. One formative moment occurred while witnessing a military doctor, Captain Ono, open a man's chest without proper anesthesia for "purposes of instruction" (Lee 76). This experience instills in Hata the severity with which the military outpost handles perceived crimes and what is deemed a suitable punishment, all under the guise of medical education and training. After using the bone saw and rib spreader to gain access to the conscious man's heart, Captain Ono proceeds to stop the heart with a paddle "connected to a modified field telephone" and charged by a hand crank, and then vigorously massages the heart until it beats again. Hata's complete support of established hierarchies allows him to believe that his supervisor, a trained medical doctor, only has the best intentions: "[Ono] wished to show us a possible emergency maneuver in the field, in instances of the most grievous trauma" (Lee 76). Hata's justifications betray the actual horror of the situation: the Captain and medic soldiers and "interested others" are not observing an emergency medical situation, but a cold and calculated exercise of power (Lee 76). The repeated stopping and starting of the man's heart without sedation is not for medical purposes, but as a form of punishment: "The patient was a Burmese man, a cobbler who was found stealing from

the supply tent and who was condemned to death by beheading. But the doctor, a Captain Ono, asked the commanding officer if he would commute the sentence and give the man over to him" (Lee 76). When Hata describes the situation as "more academic than anything else," his word choice is startling, but conveys his deeply rooted acceptance for the two systems that controlled his younger life: a colonial education with its forced assimilation, and the military's violent "order" and its hierarchies.

The same denial that enables Hata to describe the torturous open-chest surgery as "academic," and believe that Captain Ono operates under the best intentions, is the same internalized logic that prevents Hata from understanding his own vulnerable subject formation. By calling himself a Japanese national, Hata refuses to acknowledge that he is a colonized subject. His denial of his own vulnerability offers insight to why he struggles, initially, to properly contextualize the Korean comfort women as consistent with the military and warfare, not distinct from it. Whereas Hata seems to have accepted that war is violence waged between men as a matter of nationalism, for the duration of his time as a soldier, he waffles between describing the sexual exploitation of Korean women as routine and exceptional. His contradictory logic is highly gendered and flawed: Hata is unable to connect Korean comfort women's sexual exploitation as an extension of the same system that permits Ono to inhumanely kill the Burmese man. For Hata, sexual exploitation is actually the key difference between his boyhood experiences and the experiences of K, or Sunny. Female sexuality, Hata believes, is essentially precarious and is why he sees the women in his life, K and Sunny, as vulnerable and in need of saving. As a man and a soldier, Hata chooses to use masculinity as a shield that aids in the denial that his adoption into a Japanese family, as well as his subsequent loyalty and

imagined debt to his Japanese parents, are byproducts of colonialism that involve sexuality, or at the very least, ideas of normative and patriarchal heterosexuality.

Hata strives for morality as a way to navigate the sexually exploitative practices—and his own complicity—under patriarchy. He paints himself as exceptional among his peers noting, for instance, that "Drinking was never very alluring to me" (Lee 105) and insisting that as a young man he "did not seek out the pleasure of women" (Lee 153). In contrast, Hata describes his fellow soldiers as lustful men, driven by vice. When Hata deems himself exceptional to his peers, the sexual exploitative practices (like military prostitution) are characterized as base and questionable. Conflicts arise out of the fact that his peers and superiors—men he is conditioned to respect and whose respect he seeks in return—participate in these services. Although Hata's self-proclaimed exceptionalism seems to place him outside the system of military prostitution his moral proclamations have nothing to do with ethical stances. Furthermore, Hata's insistence that morality prevents him from having sex with conscripted sex workers is based in lies and for the sake of appearances; he admits to seeking out military prostitutes in secret (Lee 106). Anne Anlin Cheng argues that Hata's choices represent "ethical failures not because they are ever intentionally evil but precisely because they are often under the sincere guise (and here I use the oxymoron deliberately) of normality and good intentions" ("Passing" 564). Given the constructed nature of both normality and good intentions, as defined by the standards around him, Hata's relationship to women's sexuality during wartime thus reflects both his disapproval (because prostitution devalues women, thus women lack value) and his participation (because seeking pleasure form military prostitutes is a widely accepted practice by soldiers).

Hata's internal conflict regarding the military prostitution is not about the women, or their agency, but his own struggles with being a loyal colonized subject. The line of thinking

seems to be, if Hata can deny having *any* physical or sexual temptations, then he has found a way to avoid condoning the practices of militarized prostitution without disavowing the Japanese nation-state or critiquing his commanding officers. If anything, Lee is suggesting that Hata's morality is a distraction from other ethical complexities regarding the production of vulnerable subjects, such as the Burmese man's "punishment" for stealing or later, K's request to be mercifully killed. Indeed, not only does Hata's "principled stance" do nothing to dismantle the violent, exploitative systems he's a part of, but Hata's self-congratulatory position actually helps to uphold them.

Whereas the novel presents militarization and sexual exploitation as linked state-sanctioned forms of violence, Hata struggles to consistently see these systems as connected because that would confirm his complicity in both. When he first enlisted in the Japanese military as Lieutenant Jiro Kurohata, Hata accompanied two friends as they sought out Singapore sex workers. Hata describes how "my comrades and I were on our way to a welcoming club, a grand house which was once a prominent British family's residence but was now used as a semi-official officers' club, with the usual entertainments. There was no sanctioned establishment as yet, and we young officers were more than grateful for the outpost" (Lee 105). The "sanctioned establishment" referenced here is likely the Korean comfort stations, which along with warfare in general, are often characterized as exceptional. As Anne Anlin Cheng argues, the novel "unravels the complicity between these different levels of ethical confrontations, from the quotidian to the exceptional" ("Passing" 558). Following this framework, then, the quotidian is Bedley Run and his life with Sunny, whereas the exceptional is his time as a soldier in the Yangon region of Myanmar. I contend, however, that the existence of the welcoming club, which offered the same services as the Korean comfort stations, blurs the distinctions between the

quotidian and the exceptional. The manner by which the novel describes the welcoming club, that it is a "grand house that was once a prominent British family's residence" references the layers of colonialism on the area, but also connects a familial space with sex work. Just as the fire disturbed the pristine state of the Bedley Run family room, the Singapore welcoming club blurs the spatial distinctions between private and public, suggesting that the familial is not separate from colonialism but helps maintain it. In a discussion of European colonialism in the Indies during the late-nineteenth century, Ann Laura Stoler examines how the regulation of sexual relations between European men and Asian women was in relation to the formation of the family, not antithetical to it (47-49). Similarly, Cheng concludes that "Hata's failure under extraordinary circumstances is but an intensification of the failures that precondition 'normal' civility and society" ("Passing" 564). The exploitation of Asian women by officers is a practice that does not require extraordinary circumstances, and furthermore, warfare and militarized prostitution are both quotidian and exceptional under imperial and patriarchal nationalisms.

When Hata and his fellow medical soldiers, Enchi and Fujimori, arrive at the Singapore welcoming club, they encounter a crowd encircled around a young girl's dead body. The cause of her death is suicide, specifically, the impact from how she intentionally landed after jumping out the first-story window. Because of their training, Fujimori and Hata are tasked with preparing the dead girl's body for pick up and removal. For Hata, this is the first dead person he's encountered and noted how she was "just a girl…perhaps fifteen or so" (Lee 108). He also acknowledges that "I kept thinking that she looked to be Korean, with her broad, square face. She barely had any pubic hair," but Hata seems relatively unaffected by these observations as though they are just matter of fact (Lee 108). And yet something is building inside him, that he can describe but not quite understand: "Why I was going to see these new girls, then, I couldn't

exactly say. I was naturally disturbed by the earlier events, but the fact that I would be concerned in particular with them, even think an iota about their circumstance, confused and irked me" (Lee 111). When one of the young Korean girls runs from one of the bedrooms, naked; Hata prevents her escape and, reflexively, responds to her in Korean. His actions are enough for a commanding officer to catch up with the young girl and force her back into the bedroom, thanking Hata in the process. Hata is just as bewildered as the girl that he spoke Korean and reflects: "Before they reach the room, the girl looked back at me, the side of her face raised red from the blow. I thought she was going to say something again, maybe *O-ppah*, how a girl would address her older brother or other male, but she just gazed at me instead, ashen-faced, as if in wonder whether I had uttered the words to her at all" (Lee 112).

Although Hata attempts to remain detached from the young women involved in military prostitution and sexual conscription, his relationships with Corporal Endo and K, one of the Korean comfort girls of the novel, push Hata's defense mechanisms to the point of breaking. In contrast to his supposed lack of sexual appetite, Hata describes Corporal Endo's desires for women as indulgent and excessive. Hata frames Endo's lust through his attention to the young soldier's attachment to photos of nude, Western women. Although Hata would like to present himself as an exception among his comrades, his word choices regarding Endo and the "illicit slides of disrobed maidens," shows that Hata is just as preoccupied with these photos as Endo (Lee 153). Endo's desires are a problem because they defy national and gender norms for Japanese men (Lee 154). As a result, Endo is quickly and easily pathologized by his fellow soldiers. Hata, falling in line with the social majority, admits, "I took pity on him because of this, though I was afraid that lurking beneath his quick mind was a mental instability, a defect of character that I was certain would lead him to a troubling circumstance" (Lee 156-7). When his

fellow soldiers and even his superior, Captain Ono, mock Hata for his association with Endo (the younger corporal regards Hata as a friend and confidant), the protagonist feels anger, but also deep shame (Lee 178). Although part of him feels protective of Endo, Hata is afraid of the ways the younger corporal might disgrace him. The morning after the shooting, Hata admits:

> I hadn't gone in search of Corporal Endo the night before, nor did I have any interest in doing so amid the usual early bustle of the day…But in truth, I was more than just annoyed with the corporal. In fact I felt sure my association with him—and indeed, my continued tolerance—should quickly come to an end. I didn't care about him, or perhaps closer to the truth was that I didn't wish to care about him any longer. He had plumbed the limits of my patience, and I was sure I should be done with him. I was also aware that a half-humorous notion about me had begun circulating about the camp. It was not so awful, but embarrassing all the same; namely, it was being joked that I was intending to become a professional mental therapist or psychologist after the war, and that I was employing Corporal Endo as a "practice patient." (Lee 177-8)

Ultimately, Hata is more afraid of what others think of him, rather than what might be happening to Endo. But interestingly, Hata's decision to distance himself from Endo and his suspicions that he might be mentally unstable are not because of Endo's "excessive" interest in women. Hata draws these conclusions after the young corporal declares that he wants nothing to do with the Korean comfort women.

Endo initially confounds the other soldiers because of his social awkwardness, but later is openly mocked because of his gender play. Either unafraid or ignorant of the military demands for gender conformity, Corporal Endo becomes notorious for publicly acting out romantic

scenes, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich or Claudette Colbert. According to Hata, such behavior is contextualized by the "threats of attack from British and American dive-bombers," which caused the soldiers' behavior to become "more extreme." He describes Endo's behavior through the lens of surveillance, noting:

> Sometimes, if one stood outside the communications tent, one could hear him talking to himself in a singsong voice, pretending—as he readily admitted to me—to be a film star like Marlene Dietrich or Claudette Colbert in the midst of romantic seduction…he memorized well enough certain dramatic tones and utterances such that his gibberish account seemed almost real. (Lee 157-8)

Endo's behavior causes the fellow soldiers to suspect that he is gay: "Others had heard him do this as well, and there was soon suspicion among some of the officers that the corporal was a homosexual, and one of the captains even asked me if in my opinion he was a threat to the other men, like a contagion that should be checked" (Lee 158). In Hata's eyes, gayness makes the young soldier even riskier. During this time, Endo continues to excitedly anticipate the arrival of Korean comfort women, but believes that their arrival will mark a more festive atmosphere rather than the violent reality of their "volunteerism." His misguided understanding leads him to ask Hata if he might assist with their reception, as though the girls are honored guests (Lee 161). I contend that rather than characterize Endo as dull-witted, his request should be interpreted as coming from a place of queerness, underscoring not everyone at the military outpost has the same relationship to military prostitution. Whereas Hata protests sexual involvement with the Korean comfort woman, he is ultimately still complicit. With the case of Endo, however, his request is queer because it doesn't uphold the patriarchial violence that organizes the outpost. Ultimately, his non-normative relationship to sexual violence is dismissed by the same system

that perpetuates the violence. Endo functions as a disruptive element within the narrative; not so much a foil to Hata, but rather, the young soldier's comments destabilize Hata's narration of events, as well as undermine the nationalist framework within the military space. On one hand, Lee does not want it to be easy for the reader to naturalize the sexual violence within the narrative, as voiced by Hata or perhaps, as expected because wartime is exceptional. On the other hand, the narrative makes a case that the ideologies embedded within the sexual violence of Korean comfort women is portable: Hata was able to transpose those same ideas about female sexuality from K to Sunny within the context of a nuclear family.

After the arrival of the Korean comfort women, Endo's behavior shifts drastically. When the truth of their "volunteer" status becomes more evident to both Endo and Hata, the former realizes that he does not desire to have sex with the comfort women. He confesses to Hata: "You see, sir, I've decided not to visit those girls. I don't know why, for sure, because it's true that every day I've been in this miserable situation I've been thinking about being with a woman, any woman. But yesterday after I saw them arrive in camp I suddenly didn't think about it anymore" (168). For Hata, this confession is even more distressing than the young soldier's gender play; Endo's inability to participate in socially expected sexual behavior causes Hata to regard the young soldier as truly crazy. When Corporal Endo asks Hata to take his ticket to be first in his ranking to visit with the comfort girls, Hata reflects: "I knew he was unsteady, but now I was quite certain his mind had descended on a most infirm path. His only tempering note was how he had described the present time as a 'miserable situation,' an appraisal that seemed highly regular, if somewhat disloyal to our morale and cause, and which, no doubt, was undeniably true" (Lee 169). As Ann Laura Stoler argues, "heterosexual unions based on concubinage and prostitution across the colonial divide were defended as a 'necessary evil' to counter those deemed more

dangerous still—carnal relations between men and men" (*Carnal Knowledge* 2). Although Corporal Endo has not expressed sexual desires for other men, his refusal to be with comfort women signals a potential perversity that Hata "charitably" describes as a "most infirm path."

As Endo's disposition continues to darken, Hata tries to fulfill his duties as a "medical professional" with regards to the young Korean girls – as though decorum and professionalism could make their sexual servitude more acceptable or less violent for them. But despite Hata's fearful denial and attempts to find solace in the objectivity of medicine, the deaths of three individuals act as formative cautionary tales for the protagonist. This first is a sentry who is shot in cold blood while Hata was out walking with a distressed Endo (Lee 174); the second one is K's sister, mercifully killed by Endo so that she would not have to endure serving the soldiers (Lee 188-9); and the third is Endo's own death, after he is charged with treason for killing K's sister (Lee 189). These deaths reiterate to Hata that if he does not abide to the most normative expectations, any choices or actions contrary to the status quo will be seen as akin to treason. Rather than consider how Corporal Endo has suffered, and is ultimately killed, because the military outpost cannot discipline Endo's queerness, the young man becomes more of a cautionary tale that "haunts" Hata in the years following his WWII service.

For an ethnic Korean raised as a Japanese national, going against Japan would obliterate Hata's subjectivity, for he does not have a Korean identity to fall back on. In the days following Endo's execution, Hata admits his main fear is "to be marked by a failure like Corporal Endo's, which was not one of ego or self but of an obligation public and total—and one resulting in the burdening of the entire society of his peers" (Lee 229). According to Hata, Endo failed to fulfill societal expectations when he refused to have sex with the Korean comfort women and Hata sincerely hopes that when it's his time to fulfill social expectations, he is able to do so.

Given the tenuous relationship Hata has with his Japanese identity, which demands his fidelity to heteronormative ideals about family and sexual morality, *A Gesture Life* makes the case that national identity in a postcolonial context is a series of choices that extends from colonial rule. This framework offers insight as to how Hata might choose to migrate to America and enthusiastically embrace the "successful immigrant" narrative. For Hata, arguably, after the death of K and the end of the war, being Japanese was not longer psychically possible. Perhaps, then, Hata does not want to be American because he believes in the values of the US, but because he is trying to construct what he believes is a tenable subjectivity. One of the major implications of Hata's ability to translate his coping mechanisms and survivalist skills from Japan to small town America during the 1980s, suggests that the impact of US militarization in Asian countries during the second-half of the twentieth century (including war) has carried over into US society and the formation of the Asian American family, especially ones with transnational adoptees.

Hata's relationship with K and the choices he makes in the name of love reflect his fears about going against society's norms, coupled with his sexist beliefs about female sexuality. K is removed from the comfort house and put under Hata's care because the military doctor, Captain Ono, has singled her out for himself. On the captain's orders, Hata is responsible for ensuring that K is disease-free and available whenever Captain Ono calls upon her. As a result of their increased time together, Hata and K develop a relationship. Their bond is deepened when, after Hata speaks to her in "her own language," she realizes that Hata is an ethnic Korean who was raised as a Japanese national (Lee 232, 234). When K tries to appeal to Hata as "a countryman" and requests that he kill her so that she doesn't have to serve Captain Ono, his sense of loyalty to his responsibilities as a medical soldier enable him to refuse her. If Hata were to kill K, the act

would disrupt the order within the military outpost and he would rather deny K than step out of line and be marked by failure.

Despite Hata's attempts to fulfill his duties and maintain a distance between himself and K, she has the ability to blur the distinctions between Hata's Korean self and his Japanese self; his colonized self and his role as a colonizer. For instance, when K asks about his childhood, Hata is surprised that she wants to know about his adoptive family, the Kurohatas, *and* his birth family, the Ohs (Lee 244). During their conversations in Korean, Hata is able talk about himself in ways that include all aspects of his past and K is able to experience as sense of kinship, despite his earlier claim that he is not her countryman. When K insists that they speak to each other in darkness, Hata realizes K wanted to hide in the cover of night so she could "pretend we were other people, somewhere else, with the most ordinary reasons for keeping such furtive company" (Lee 252).

In the end, Hata's unwillingness to mercifully kill K is not his biggest betrayal; rather, Hata's accusations that K is lying about not yet servicing soldiers in the comfort house reveals his true perceptions of her. When Captain Ono mocks Hata for being in love with K, the higher ranking officer tries to ruin Hata's image of K by claiming she has been pregnant as a result of being a comfort woman (Lee 270). If this were accurate, then in Hata's eyes, K would be no better than the sex workers he visited in Singapore and likewise, he would be no better than his fellow soldiers who are driven by vice. Upon demanding that K prove that she's never been pregnant, Hata orders her to remove her clothes and then proceeds to have nonconsensual sex with her: "She did not hold me but she did not push me away. I never meant for this but I could no longer balk, or control myself, and then something inside her collapsed, snapped clean, giving way like some storm-sieged roof, and then I descended upon her, and I searched her, every

lighted and darkened corner, and every room" (Lee 295). Although the novel makes it clear that K is not in a position to say no to Hata, his narration doesn't express his understanding of their power dynamic or that he has raped her. The possibility of K being pregnant shatters the illusion that Hata can see K as more than an object or a disposable person. In the end, the gendered experiences of sexual violence under colonialism force Hata and K back to their roles of colonizer and colonized.

K's gruesome death is the result of attacking a soldier after it was decided that she would return to the comfort house. Now fully aware that Hata only values her sexually, and thus would never kill her out of mercy, K decides to take matters into her own hands by injuring the officer. According to Hata, "She had cut him, but not too deeply, as though she were trying only to mark him. She didn't move away" (Lee 303). Hata also notes that the injured soldier is the same lieutenant officer who executed Endo on the charge of treason and that K is killed in the same clearing where Endo slit her sister's throat (Lee 302; 304).

Sunny's late-term abortion, and Hata's role in its execution, is described within the narrative as one of the most difficult experiences of his life. Lee gives his narrator a small window of honest reflection and accurate recall as Hata admits, "what I saw that evening at the clinic endures, remaining unaltered, preserved. And if in my life I've witnessed the most terrible of things, if I've seen what no decent being should ever look upon and have to hold in close remembrance, perhaps it means I should be left to the cold device of history, my likeness festooning the ramparts of every house and town and district of man" (Lee 345). The logics of eugenics and racism still motivate Hata's actions, but rather than be cast as a villain, Lee portrays Hata as a character who lives with the knowledge that he does not deserve others' generosity or gratitude. With great ambivalence, Hata states, "And though nearly every soul I've closely

known has come to some dread or grave misfortune, I instead persist, with warmth and privilege accruing to me unabated, ever securing my good station here, the last place I will belong" (Lee 346).

The point is not to compare Hata's complicity with K's murder and Sunny's late-term abortion. If there is any comparison, perhaps it's the candid way he describes Sunny's procedure, as opposed to the Burmese prisoner's open-chest surgery during the war. Although Hata used racist and classist lies (that the father of Sunny's unborn child is black and a drug addict and thus, an abortion would help rescue Sunny from a life entangled with such an unsavory figure) to convince the obstetrician to perform such a risky surgery, this is one of the few moments in the novel where Hata actively and explicitly takes the blame for his choices and actions without suggesting to the reader that doing so is in service of another purposeful denial. This moment, so late in the novel, brings little relief to the reader hoping that Hata takes responsibility for all of his poor choices.

The grave overreach of Hata's involvement in Sunny's abortion is the culmination of his colonial, eugenics-based logics in which female sexuality is be strictly, violently regulated at all costs. As her father, Hata is fulfilling his patriarchal duty, for Sunny's benefit, but also to prevent her from falling below mostly unnamed society's standards. But without the context or justification of war, the military, or a nuclear family, Lee presents Hata's actions in the harshest of lights. And of the many vulnerable figures present within the narrative, Lee uses Hata to make the case that vulnerable subjects still have the capacity to harm, especially through social constructions of gender and sexuality.

In the end, Hata's decision to sell his "beloved home" officially signifies his ability to let go, from the structure and site that once tethered him to K. and Sunny and his colonial past (Lee

356). The novel concludes ambiguously: “Let me simply bear my flesh, and blood, and bones. I will fly a flag. Tomorrow when this house is alive and full, I will be outside looking in. I will be already on a walk someplace, in this town or the next or five thousand miles away. I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home” (Lee 356). The fact that Lee does not assign Hata a new location, I contend, suggests the idea that no nation, site, or space is outside of colonialism. But furthermore, it’s important to recognize that Hata is not a decolonizing figure simply because he can sell his house. The work of decolonization is more involved, but also—importantly— Lee is not interested in absolving Hata of his past violent acts or unethical choices.

**Conclusion**

In *A Gesture Life*, Hata is motivated by an imperial nationalism defined by adherence to extreme heterosexual norms to which he aspires but cannot achieve. When queerness—expressed by Corporal Endo—exposes, to Hata, the violence of state-sanctioned sexual exploitation, and even threatens to dismantle it, Hata cannot face his own vulnerabilities as a colonized, adopted subject. If Hata were to agree with Endo, and subsequently relate to or empathize with K, he would be forced to acknowledge the violence (albeit purposely unnamed by Lee within the narrative) he experienced under the same colonial system that perpetuates her sexual conscription.

Hata instead chooses to grasp at any power available to him as an ostensibly Japanese national and conform to the most normative scripts accessible to him with regards to race, gender, and sexuality. Later, these beliefs are further translated into a neo-colonial framework through his responses to Sunny and her adoption, and as she ages, her sexuality. Hata would rather uphold the imperial nationalisms (first Japanese, and later, the US) that have contributed to his psychic pain and continue to endure under the very systems that oppress him, than align with

a queer or feminized Korean subject position, as expressed, albeit distinctly, through Endo, Sunny, and K.

## CHAPTER 4: THE IDEAL VICTIM AND THE GAY CHILD: THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA ON RACIALIZED DESIRE IN ALEXANDER CHEE'S *EDINBURGH*

"An examination of the racialization of intimacy reveals the political, economic, and cultural processes by which race has been forgotten across a long history of colonial relations and imperial practices, dissociated from or subsumed by other axes of social difference, such that it can only return as a structure of feeling, as a melancholic trace demanding historical explanation."
*The Feeling of Kinship*, David L. Eng, 2010

"[The] focus on trauma serves as an entry point into a vast archive of feelings, the many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more that are part of the vibrancy of queer cultures."
*An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich, 2003

### Introduction

In the decades following the Korean War, the mixed race Korean child is the literal product of US-Korean relations on the peninsula and the significance of this child figures prominently within various formations of the family within the Korean diaspora. As A.J. Yumi Lee asserts, early iterations of the Korean diasporic family were made possible by heteronormative US immigration policies intended for Korean military brides and mixed race children conceived by US male soldiers. Grace M. Cho and Hosu Kim have argued that the mixed race children who remained in Korea contributed to the first wave of transnational Korean adoptees, helping to solidify the formation of American families with Korean children. Figures such as Beccah, from chapter two; and Sunny, from chapter three; represent these particular histories of sexuality and US militarization, defining the sexual relations between Korean and American subjects through specific racial, gendered, and sexual configurations. My analyses of the Korean American narratives from Chapter two and three reveal how familial relations within the Korean diasporic family help translate histories of violence and war for the mixed race child, influencing how colonialism and trauma are experienced between and across generations. This

chapter's focus on Alexander Chee's *Edinburgh* (2001) continues my dissertation's investigations of trauma, sexuality, and genealogies, but focuses on a new version of the mixed race child figure by which to consider how the Korean diasporic family manages race and sexuality. The protagonist of Chee's novel is not the offspring of a US soldier and Korean woman during the 1950s and 1960s, but a mixed race American child born to a Korean father and an American mother of Scottish descent, offering reconfigured kinship models by which to examine twentieth-century Korean histories of sexuality and trauma.

Chee's novel is a poetic and haunting story about the emotional impact of traumatic sexual experiences on a young, gay subject during the 1980s. Narrated predominantly through the child perspective of Aphias "Fee" Zhe, the protagonist is a half-Korean, half-Scottish American and twelve years old when the novel begins. The narrative style is highly affective, focusing on Fee's feelings of loss while only loosely tracking his journey from childhood to adulthood across the novel's four sections. Written in a constant present tense, which Chee characterizes as the "verb choice of victims of sex crimes and disasters" (Cooper 15), the first-person narration gives the impression that events occur as Fee describes them, emphasizing the young boy's psychic disorientation and the associative difficulties of imagining a future in the aftermath of childhood sexual abuse.

Although the novel uses intergenerational relationships to historicize the Korean diaspora and Fee's family has been affected by colonial violence, the central trauma of *Edinburgh* emerges from the protagonist's experiences of childhood sexual abuse by his assailant Big Eric, the Pine State Boys Chorus director. Korean culture is woven throughout Fee's narration as a series of tales and folklore as told by his paternal grandfather. These include personal stories about life under Japanese occupation and the loss of Fee's great-aunts, his grandfather's sisters

who went missing during World War II after being forced to serve as Korean comfort women for the Japanese Imperial Army. Coupled with these family stories are the grandfather's Korean origin myths involving fox-demons and Lady Tammamo, a fox who appears as a woman to marry a human man. After her death, her children are trapped in their human forms and have no choice but to live on as men and women, from whom Fee is told he is a descendant (Chee 2-3). Recounting the mythical alongside the historical, Fee's repeated references to his great-aunts throughout his narration represent his struggles to cope with the sexual abuse and his survival in the face of his friends' deaths. In *Edinburgh*, the affective responses to loss, as opposed to lineage, enable attachment across generations, as well as between individuals who are not biologically or legally related.

Presenting an intricate storyline of a gay adolescent's sexual development within a traumatic plot involving pedophilia and its aftermath, the novel uses Fee's first-person narration to explore the depths of both the sexual abuse and his burgeoning gay identity. And although the sexual abuse and Fee's sexual orientation exist independently within the novel, resisting a causal relationship between the two, the pedophilia significantly shapes the other storylines and alters how Fee understands his sexuality. In a 2000 interview with Michael Cooper for *Lamda Book Report,* Chee describes childhood sexual abuse as all-consuming and his attempts to capture the victim's "incredible anger and where it goes." According to Chee, *Edinburgh* depicts "How it is to live and twenty years later, when someone touches you by surprise, you strike them, even if they love you, because the shadow of the hurt, a creature that is part you and part the person who hurt you, is still there. I wanted to write about that shadow" (Cooper 15). I focus on how Chee uses the overwhelming and lasting impact of child abuse, as opposed to Fee's gay identity or

Korean ancestry, as an entry point to explore how trauma and sexuality have the ability to organize one's sense of self and how they orient themselves with others.

Sexuality takes many forms within Chee's novel, including same-sex desire, procreation, and pedophilia; and as a result, multiple figures—the child victim, the gay child, the mixed race child, the Korean comfort woman, and the colonialized subject—are enfolded into Fee's tenuous journey into adulthood. His sense of self is mediated through his body which is predominantly characterized as the site of his abuse and desires. And although Fee's body is also racialized, in contrast to his complex feelings about his sexuality, he expresses ambivalence toward his Koreanness and a general apathy with issues of race. In a 2010 article about transgressive texts within Asian American literary studies, Jennifer Ann Ho contends that "while [Fee's] identity as a mixed race Korean American is mentioned, the drama of the novel centers on sexual rather than racial conflict" and furthermore, the narrative reflects Chee's disinterest in exploring how Fee's Korean heritage might factor into his sexual traumas and healing (221, fn. 16). Indeed, Chee's protagonist minimizes his racialized experiences which cleaves race from sexuality within the narrative; however, I contend the novel's emphasis on sexuality does not characterize Fee or the text as postracial. Rather, it is intentional expression about how childhood sexual abuse is capable of casting a shadow—to use Chee's phrasing—over other past traumas.

Furthermore, the narrative's skew toward Fee's sexual experiences, with minimal explicit consideration of how racialization figures within a young gay subject's struggle to heal from violence and loss, raises key questions: how do narratives about childhood sexual abuse fit within Korean American histories of sexuality? What is the relationship between sexuality and race for a child victim like Fee? In *Q & A: Queer in Asian America* (1998), a foundational collection of essays championing a "queer Asian American studies" movement, editors David L.

Eng and Alice Y. Hom contend that Asian American subjects cannot be defined strictly through single-axis categories, that "to insert questions of sexuality, sexual identification, and sexual orientation into our concept of Asian American identity would immediately dislodge a static, outdated, and exclusively racial notion of who 'we' are" (*Q & A* 2-3). Through a queer Asian American studies, Eng and Hom identify then-existing needs within Asian American studies and queer studies to broaden their analytic models and politics beyond heterosexuality and whiteness, respectively. Their queer of color framework asserts "that our very epistemological conception of what it is to be queer cannot be understood without a serious consideration of how social differences such as race constitute our cognitive perceptions of a queer world, how sexual and racial difference come into existence only in relation to one another but with a reminder that sexuality and race cannot be brought into symmetrical alignment with each other" (*Q & A* 12). *Edinburgh,* with its multiple forms of sexuality and resultant figures, enables a discussion of about how vulnerability is expressed in terms of race, gender, and sexuality within the Korean diaspora. If, as Eng and Hom assert, "race and sexuality cannot be brought into symmetrical alignment with each other," then Chee's novel requires a queer Asian American studies approach that considers how the understated presentation of Fee's race is actually due to trauma's effects on his experiences of racial and sexual difference within the narrative and thus, a byproduct of Fee's queer narrative of development.

Tracing the effects of trauma and sexuality within *Edinburgh* requires attention to what is unsaid or unquestioned by Fee because, as Ann Cvetkovich asserts, "trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often *seems* to leave behind no records at all" (*Archive of Feelings* 7, my emphasis). Understanding Fee as living with trauma creates critical space to examine how race, specifically his everyday

experiences involving his Koreanness, is marked by minimal discussion within the narrative. Fee's sexual trauma, and the resultant fears that his gayness makes him the same as his assailant, Big Eric, has pushed Fee's racialization (being mixed race and of Korean descent) to the edge of the first-person narration until it appears inconsequential to his development or experiences, but does not represent actual lack. In the introduction of *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, editors David L. Eng and David Kazanjian call for an expansive framework for approaches to understanding loss, that "as soon as the question 'What is lost?' is posed, it invariably slips into the question 'What remains?' That is, loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained" (*Loss* 2). For Fee, the sexual abuse produces a series of losses that certainly leave their mark. While still teenagers, for example, two of Fee's fellow choir mates use suicide as a way to cope in the aftermath of the abuse. Of which, the biggest, most significant loss is Peter, who also happens to be Fee's childhood best friend and love interest. Fee, however, is unable to mourn Peter because the conflation of his own gayness with Big Eric's pedophilia positions him in a melancholic state. Drawing on Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," Eng and Kazanjian describe melancholia as a "persistent struggle with its lost objects…While mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest, melancholia's continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects" (*Loss* 4). Fee's struggles with losing Peter are expressed through his construction of Peter as the victim worthy of sympathy, a subject position he cannot extend to himself even though he, too, is one of Big Eric's victims. This figure of the ideal child victim, with its normative associations of innocence, is a racialized one, partially because Fee is unable to see how he actively participates in his own negation. Analyzing Chee's novel as traumatic text that produces loss reveals that

race is not absent from or insignificant to *Edinburgh*, but has been disassociated from and subsumed by the novel's treatment of sexuality.

In this chapter, I use an intersectional and feminist approach, alongside queer of color critique, to discuss the novel's portrayal of childhood sexual abuse and its effects on the sexual and racial development of a young, gay individual. I focus on how the novel uses the complexities of sexual abuse and sexual development to tackle questions of futurity for a gay, biracial child, but minimizes how Fee's race and Korean American histories factor into his queered narrative of development. As such, my reading is less concerned with characterizing Fee's Korean American identity through sexual trauma, either the abuse or the experiences of his Korean aunts as comfort women. Following Eng and Kazanjian's assertion that "melancholy at the turn of [the twenty-first] century has emerged as a crucial touchstone for social and subjective formations" (*Loss* 23), I instead consider how Fee's experiences with trauma and sexuality make a strong case for asserting family histories and lineage are not guarantees in determining who we are or how we exist in the world. Fee's experiences of sexuality (traumatic and gay) as a mixed-race and gay child should not be defined by his family histories; conversely, as a victim of childhood sexual abuse, I contend that the novel suggests that Fee cannot claim knowledge of his great-aunts' experiences as Korean comfort women. Distinct diasporic traumas involving sexuality should not be flattened, which risks obscuring corresponding structural powers at work. With the case of *Edinburgh*, for conversations about how loss might promote attachment across generations (within, and external to, the familial) there must be attention to the social and political conditions that help produce the different forms of violence within the Korean diaspora.

I begin by discussing Fee as a gay child and the corresponding queerness related to the figure of child and imagined innocence. Borrowing from David L. Eng and Ann Cvetokovich's separate mobilizations of Raymond Williams' structures of feeling, I analyze the opening passages of the Prologue to examine how constructions of the child victim produce affective responses to loss. My analysis of Fee's queer narrative of development presents the argument that queer Asian American critiques without feminism risk producing an insufficient profile regarding sexual and raced vulnerabilities, specifically who figures as vulnerable and who has the potential to mourn and be mourned. In the context of the Korean diaspora, attention to the multiple sexualities within Chee's novel reveals the constructed nature of race and gender, but also, genealogies. Because this is a story about a young gay child, it would be easy to focus on homosexuality as the sexuality most significant for Fee's development from childhood to adulthood. But by acknowledging the formative role of sexual abuse in Fee's sexual development, and how racialized desires and corresponding loss queer Fee's narrative, I argue that interpretations must trace the impact of traumatic experiences throughout the intertwined stories about gay desires and family histories to understand that race and sexuality construct asymmetric and unstable relationships to genealogies and kinship within the Korean diaspora.

**The Gay Child: Sexuality, Temporality, and Fee's Melancholic Narration**

*Edinburgh* is organized into four sections, three of which are narrated by Fee. The first section, "Songs of the Fireflies," begins when Fee is twelve years old and focuses on the Korean-side of his family, his gayness, and the sexual abuse by Big Eric. This section opens with Fee's audition for the Pine State Boys Chorus and concludes around two major events: Big Eric's arrest and imprisonment and Fee's voice change, which causes him to age out of the professional choir. "January's Cathedral," the second section, picks up two years later and begins by

describing Peter's death. Peter is Fee's childhood friend, love interest, and fellow choir member; as a result of the abuse, Peter commits suicide at the start of ninth grade. In this section, Fee is a teenager during the mid-1980s and his narration carries the story through high school and into his time at Wesleyan University, despite his own struggles as a survivor. The third section creates a literal pause in Fee's maturation into adulthood and introduces Warden, Big Eric's seventeen-year-old estranged son. Entitled "And Night's Black Sleep upon the Eyes," this sections jumps ahead to 1997 through Warden's narration during his junior year at Thomas Bethune Day and Night Academy. A coincidence of events has led Fee to a job at Warden's high school as teacher and swim coach. In an ironic twist, Warden discovers his own gay desires catalyzed by his feelings for Fee. The last section, "Blue," presents Fee's adult perspective on his relationship with Warden. Fee knows that indulging Warden threatens his relationship with his partner, Bridey; and more importantly, being with Warden is an abuse of his power and position. But Fee also undermines his own agency by presenting the relationship with Warden as inevitable, using the teenager's strong resemblance to Peter as justification. In doing so, Fee is forced to confront his judgment and ultimately make a decision about the type of person he wants to be and the types of relationships he will pursue with others.

Presented as a self-aware gay child, Fee is a queer subject. His queerness pertains to his sexual orientation, which Fee understands in relation to his attraction to Peter, but also the fact that he is a sexualized child. That a child has *any* orientation is a direct challenge to "the current dominant narrative about children: children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions" (ix), as Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley assert in their introduction to *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. Fee and his choir mates' experiences with sexual trauma offer a way to investigate representations of children and sexuality, which includes sexual orientation

and identities, but also discourses about the figure of the child, presumed heterosexuality and imagined innocence of the figure of the child.

Even before the sexual abuse and melancholia, Fee's gayness calls into question the type of future available to him because, as Lee Edelman argues in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, US politics "[work] to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child" (3). This Child, who "remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics," is fundamental to discourses about progress and development predicated on a future built on heterosexuality and reproduction, subsequently excluding queerness (Edelman 3). Fee, a gay child, is unable to align with the concept of the Child and subsequently is excluded from the associative "innocence seen as continuously under siege" (Edelman 21). Edelman's call within *No Future* is to embrace the death drive at work within the excluded position that the gay child (and others) embodies; and furthermore, "By choosing to *accept* the position…by assuming the 'truth' of our queer capacity to figure the undoing of the Symbolic, and of the Symbolic subject as well, we might undertake the impossible project of imagining an oppositional political stance exempt from…the politics of reproduction" (Edelman 27). But Fee's melancholic state, perpetuated by survivor's guilt and an inability to let go of Peter, prevents Fee from even imagining an oppositional stance. Simultaneously immobilized by a lack of future and haunted by the past, this is the psychic ground from which Fee constructs Peter as an ideal victim of child abuse, borrowing from the same sociopolitical logics of innocence and protection that characterizes Edelman's Child.

Fee's narration of traumatic events, as a gay child, significantly shapes how *Edinburgh* is told and unfolds. The constant present tense, as a formal quality, undermines reading the novel as a progress narrative—where Fee's development culminates over time—because the reader

cannot easily mark time's passage throughout the novel. Especially in regards to the story's traumatic events, *Edingburgh* does not offer "before" and "after," or other signifiers of linearity. Bruhm and Hurley argue that "Verbs matter to the configuration of child sexuality in that they displace sexuality from the present to the future or the past (that is, the future anterior). This forked grammar comes to constitute the narrative status of the queer child" (*Curiouser* xviii-xix). Likewise, the feel of the novel—the reader's experience of Fee's narration—reflects the traumatic plot details, immersing the readers in Fee's perspective and amplifying the effects of witnessing Fee's child-self trying to manage the aftermath of sexual abuse. Chee is purposefully presenting Fee as a highly affected, unreliable narrator, especially with regards to the protagonist's understanding of himself in relation to other characters, such as Big Eric, Peter, and his Korean great-aunts.

The novel's constant present tense holds Fee's narration in suspension, reflecting his queer development and raising questions about the types of futurity available to him. But his traumatic experiences and sexual orientation, I contend, also *reorient* how he understands his own family histories and being mixed race. Approaching temporality within *Edinburgh* from another angle, Stephen Hong Sohn argues that there are two perspectives, his child-self and his adult-self, featured within Fee's narration. In his article, "'Burning Hides What It Burns': Retrospective Narration and the Protoqueer Asian American Child in Alexander Chee's *Edinburgh*," Sohn asserts that the novel's form and style contain multiple, layered temporalities simultaneously:

> On one hand is the child who eventually matures into the adult; on the other is the adult who reframes his childhood experiences and filters the period of his youth with his otherwise enlightened perspective. Evidence of this adult narrator comes

> through only a couple of times. One of the most striking moments appears just before another one of the choirboys kills himself. The narrator mysteriously states, "The survivor gets to tell the story. Have you figured out who survives yet?" (Chee 244-5)

The retrospective narration—"the adult who reframes his childhood experiences"— enables Fee to revise the past (not just his, but the histories of those connected to him) so that he might find survival through "alternative social formations and communal integration" (Sohn 247). Whereas Sohn considers how the grandfather's folklore stories are a Korean-specific template that teaches Fee the healing capacity for revisionist storytelling, I argue that Fee's queered narrative of development has ruptured his connection to his Korean family histories.

The effects of Fee's narration as a gay child are present throughout the novel, even in the "Blue" section when he is an adult. Trauma's influence on Fee's development is evidenced by the subtle shifts in that section's narration, as Sohn astutely traces within his argument, revealing how trauma maintains its hold on the protagonist, regardless of how much actual time has passed. According to Kathryn Bond Stockton, "the effect for the child who already feels queer (different, odd, out-of-sync, and attracted to same-sex peers) is an asynchronous self-relation" (*The Queer Child* 6). The narratives that identify and describe gay children depend upon processes of looking backward to find what was always there, but remained unnamed. Stockton's theoretical pairing of the queer child and the gay adult, when combined with Sohn's claim that there are two versions of Fee built into the novel's narrative, helps frame the narrative temporalities through Fee's sexuality. But I contend that perhaps Fee's narration is less about narrator's retrospective deployment of the past and more about how a queer child's asynchronous self-realization is incompatible with cultural associations regarding development

and physical age. Fee's childhood attempts to understand himself are complicated by the lack of language available to describe children's desires and their related experiences. More specifically, the space of Fee's self-realization is, on one hand, created by the lack of language about gayness in children, and on the other hand, heavily influenced by Big Eric's attempts to control how Fee understands gay desires.

The choir director's sexual abuse and manipulation doesn't just alter how Fee sees himself, but has a lasting effect on his feelings for Peter – his best friend and first love. At the novel's opening, the reader is introduced to the extent to which Fee's feelings of loss regarding Peter loom over and shape the narrative. Although it's not immediately clear, Fee narrates this section as an adult. Potentially reflecting on the entirety of what unfolds in the rest of the novel, Fee explains that "After he dies, missing Peter for me is like swimming in a cold spot of the lake: everyone else laughing in the warm water, under some too-close summer sun. This is the answer to the question no one asks me" (Chee 1). The Prologue then quickly moves to a different kind of loss: the stories Fee's grandfather told him about his great-aunts, who were forced into sexual servitude as Korean Comfort Women for Japanese soldiers. Fee states, "My grandfather lost his six older sisters to the Japanese during World War II. Gone and never heard from again. Comfort women was what the Japanese called those they stole for their soldiers. They were girls, though" (Chee 1). The emphasis on the aunt's ages, that they were girls and not women, establishes an affective connection between the two groups of victims within *Edinburgh:* the comfort women and the choir boys are children who experienced sexual violence. But describing the aunts and choir boys as victims encourages a sympathetic response that desexualizes them, despite how sexual violence is what links them in the first place. This pairing between the aunts and the boys, thus, should read as overly simplified. As Fee reflects in the "Blue" section, innocence is not an

inherent trait of children or childhood: “Do you remember what it was like, to be young? You do. Was there any innocence there? No. If anyone tries for innocence, it’s the adult, moving forward, forgetting” (Chee 178). As I contend, the same degree of imagined innocence usually attached to normative childhoods can be returned to the Korean aunts and the American choir boys when the constructions of the children are stripped of historical, ethnic, and gender specificities.

Fee’s associative narration of Peter and his aunts, however, also produces what Eng describes as “a melancholic trace,” building from Raymond William’s structure of feeling (*Feeling of Kinship* 10). By equating the two distinct sexual traumas (child sexual abuse and Korean comfort women) through personalized forms of loss, *Edinburgh* minimizes the gendered and colonial logics that helped make military sexual servitude possible. But Fee also narrates in this manner because of his *own* experiences with trauma in terms of sexuality *and* race. According to Ann Cvetkovich, “Thinking about trauma from the same depathologizing perspective that has animated queer understandings of sexuality opens up possibilities for understanding traumatic feelings not as a medical problem in search of a cure but as felt experiences that can be mobilized in a range of directions” (*Archive of Feeling* 47). The losses Fee endures and his psychic inability to pull himself out of melancholia, represented by the novel’s constant present tense, reflect Fee’s queer narrative of development. Unable to make sense of his experiences through linearity or lineage, Fee cannot “know” gayness or abuse, despite his attempts to gain insight and master his body and affective self. As I show in the next section, as long as Fee holds on to the notion of an ideal child victim, represented by Peter, he will struggle to build a sense of self within the multiple genealogies available to a mixed race, gay child of Korean descent.

**The Ideal Victim and Fee's Queer Narrative of Development**

In Fee's eyes, Peter represents the figure of the Child as theorized by Edelman: innocent and unassuming, and for reasons, in need of protection from all forms of sexuality. And although Peter and Fee are both sexually abused by Big Eric, Fee is unable to see himself as one who should have been protected, or as one worthy of sympathy. In fact, Fee blames himself for his friend's suicides, explaining "Peter's the one that burned. Zack was the one who pulled the trigger. Still, I feel like the bullet, the fire, like I tore his head open. I set the fire" (Chee 91); Fee cannot be a victim if he is somehow responsible. Significantly, it's his great aunts and what they represent that cause Fee to see himself as unworthy, which intricately incorporates sexual normativity and racialized desire into the novel's portrayal of how a worthy child victim is created. When visiting Moolsan-do—"an island off the coast of Korea where my family has been for generations"—with his Korean grandparents the summer before he leaves for college, Fee makes his initial connection of the shared innocence between his Korean comfort women aunts and the other choir boys (Chee 90). The trip occurs in the weeks following Zach's suicide, the aftermath of which leaves Fee emotionally incapacitated. While visiting the family shrine on Moolsan-do and paying respects to his great aunts' memories, Fee reflects:

> My grandfather knows about hauntings, it occurs to me now. Here is where he knew his sisters, here is what he remembered, every day, in his Imperial school, as the Japanese grammar spread inside him, as he learned the language of the people who took his sisters and destroyed them… At the polished stone temple, we kneel and pray, leave food…for the dead. We take turns and throw soju for them. I trace the characters with a finger, unable to read them. There's no mounds for the sisters. My grandfather doesn't know the day they died, only the day they

> were taken. He doesn't have a single grave. Only Moolsan-do. When I take my turn to pray, I asked to be helped. And hope that the prayers can arrive translated. (Chee 90-1)

In the paragraph that directly follows, Fee identifies himself as the fire and bullet that took his friends' lives. Similar to the Prologue, the narration's quick pivot from the Korean aunts to Peter and Zach conveys Fee's sense of overwhelming loss, crowding out any distinctions between the two forms of sexual violence. Moreover, the acknowledgement that "My grandfather knows about haunting, *it occurs to me now*" represents the extent to which Fee's melancholia causes him to reframe his own family histories to align with his experiences involving childhood sexual abuse (Chee 90, my emphasis). Fee's deep sense of guilt, which he compulsively feeds through comparisons of loss, is not based in survival, but sexuality. Because he is gay and desired both of his friends prior to their deaths, Fee cannot help but feel shame for his sexual orientation.

In this moment, Fee is framing the connection between his Korean aunts and two friends through predatory sexual violence. The actual blame belongs to the Japanese military and Big Eric, respectively, but Fee's melancholic state prevents him from seeing how he—and his gayness—are not responsible. In fact, the skewed understanding of his own sexuality actually supports the construction of the child victim, for whom normativity is presumed. Although heterosexuality is not explicitly named in the passage about the Korean aunts, Fee's queerness makes visible the imagined sexual normativity the aunts were brutally denied when those who took the grandfather's sisters, "destroyed them" (Chee 91).

Fee feels perhaps most responsible for the fact that he didn't warn Peter about Big Eric and later, he couldn't prevent Big Eric from targeting Peter, despite being only twelve-years-old

at the time. Following Big Eric's conviction, Fee reflects: "Sometimes I wonder if [Peter] knew why I always asked him to never tell. Why I helped Big Eric hide in plain sight. I didn't have an answer for Peter then but he never asked. I have an answer, now. Hiding him hid me" (Chee 69). Here Fee equates his gayness with Big Eric's pedophilia, which enable his desires for Peter contribute to the idea that Peter is an innocent figure and he, Fee, is a complicit in the violence. But this construction of Peter as an ideal victim, which contributes to Fee's inability to embrace Edelman's death drive, is not simply because Fee is a sexualized child who is gay—and presumably Peter is not. Peter as an ideal victim is also made possible because whereas Fee is a mixed race subject of Korean descent, Peter is white.

When Fee asks the reader, "Do you remember what it was like, to be young? Was there any innocence there?" he is concerned about the harmful effects of attributing an imagined innocence to children. According to *Edinburgh*, the child—and especially the gay child—is particularly at risk: "If innocence is ignorance of the capacity for evil, then it's what adults have, when they forget what it's like to be a child" (Chee 178). As Bruhm and Hurley note with regards to children and sexuality, "The very effort to flatten the narrative of the child into a story of innocence has some queer effects" (*Curiouser* xiv). Similarly, as Kathryn Bond Stockton argues in *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009) all children—not just gay children—are "getting queerer in the century that enshrined and protected the child" (6). One of Stockton's versions of a queer child is "the child queered by innocence or queered by color," which causes "estrangement from what they approach: the adulthood against which they much be defined…The contours of this normative strangeness may explain why children, as an *idea*, are likely to be both white and middle-class" (*The Queer Child* 31). The other child figures within the novel—the Korean aunts who are figured as children and Peter and Zach, figured as

child victims—are defined by this very need for protection while being simultaneously granted normative strangeness, to borrow Stockton's phrasing. All of which directly contributes to the racialization of intimacy within *Edinburgh* and Fee's queer narrative of development.

**Fee and Big Eric: Racialized Desire and Sexual Knowledge Production**

Given the queerness of children and sexuality, it's important to note how Chee uses a number of aesthetic and formal strategies to complicate the representations of sexual abuse and the gay child in the novel. The sexual abuse occurs the summer before Fee's thirteenth birthday. Big Eric uses camping trips with section leaders and a longer, two-week choir camp as a cover to isolate and control the boys. Big Eric first assaults Fee during the smaller camping trips, coercing him and the other boys to swim and sleep in the nude while the director takes photos to presumably add to his collection. As Big Eric takes naked photos of Little Eric, Fee tries to disconnect from the situation by sinking to the bottom of the rock pool; when he breaks the surface for air, Fee realizes he cannot escape what is happening: "Little Eric and Big Eric continue [the naked photo session]. Click. I dive down again, drifting" (Chee 13). Chee's use of figurative language to capture Fee's experience—a young boy's submersion under water as analogous to the disorientation of sexual abuse—softens the description of pedophilia for the reader, but also creates narrative space to describe the complexities of the relationship between the choral director and young boy. Written in a lyrical manner, *Edinburgh* avoids the trappings of a confessional, first-person narrative when conveying the abuse from Fee's perspective. This is fitting because Fee cannot be characterized solely as a child abuse victim: that label oversimplifies his relationship to sexuality, potentially overshadowing his gayness and subsequent desires. Similarly, Big Eric's camera is more than just a tool of sexual abuse, but also acts as a metaphor for how the director stares at Fee, unblinking and unyielding. Big Eric makes

Fee feel as though the director could "can see into my throat, to the place just where my voice starts, where, as he says, the breath resides" (Chee 11), exposing and trapping the young boy in the same way the camera captures an image. This power dynamic establishes the foundation of control that Big Eric has over Fee: theirs is a relationship of gaze and reflection, which causes Fee to believe that his gayness makes him more like the choir director than his fellow choir mates.

At the summer camp, Big Eric holds rehearsals during the day and segregates the boys based on his sexual preferences at night. The boys picked to sleep in Cabin 1, including Peter, resemble each other like "brothers, blond, Scandinavian, mild, clean limbed" (Chee 17). And although Fee is assigned to Cabin 2, Big Eric exerts a different type of control over him by assigning the young boy to be cabin leader. In this role, Fee is in charge of bed checks and acts as peace-keeper; but in truth, Big Eric has instructed Fee to keep those not in Cabin 1 preoccupied and unsuspecting. In return, aware of what Big Eric is actually asking Fee to do, the young boy feels guilty, believing that he is complicit in Big Eric's abuse. Watching from his post as Cabin 2 leader, Fee wants to intervene but is unable: "I have in my mind the idea that I need to make this end, that there should never be another place like this. I sit on the dock instead, watch the lake heave in the dark" (Chee 17). After Big Eric entangles Fee in the sexual abuse that occurs at summer camp, he and Fee participate in mutual identification processes through a shared gaze that eroticizes Peter and reflects distortions between the adult abuser and the child victim. And as a result, due to a combination of guilt and shame, twelve-year-old Fee cannot help but identify with his abuser, which in part, allows him to maintain his desire for Peter.

At the summer's conclusion, when choir mate Zach, asks, "Did you know, before?" (Chee 38), the boy's question hangs in suspension without a definite topic on which to land.

There are a few different sexual experiences to which Zach could be referring: a fellow section leader, Zach was present with Fee during that first camping trip and naked photo shoot; while at camp, he and Fee embarked on the beginnings of a sexually intimate relationship, separate from Big Eric. Additionally, the abuse has not yet been publicly discovered, but is known by those who attended choir camp. At this point in the novel, the boys themselves are unsure how things will unfold. And yet, despite the openness of the question, Fee believes that Zach is asking exclusively about the sexual abuse and thinks to himself:

> I did know…I thought I knew what Big Eric was. I thought I knew because I thought it was the same as me. We are both in love with boys. I know what Big Eric watches, now, though, in me. He sees that I know, we are not the same. I did not know before and now I do, and so he watches for this knowledge in me, a light moving closer slowly through some faint dark. (Chee 38)

Rather than name the abuse as the thing that connects himself to Big Eric, Fee believes that what links them together is desire: "We are both in love with boys." This statement expresses how sexual orientation is the thing that binds Fee to Big Eric. At the beginning of the passage, the young boy states twice that he thought he understood Big Eric, suggesting that Fee recognizes the director as a sexual predator. And yet, that understanding is not stable because there was a period of time in which Fee believed that gayness and pedophilia are the same: "I thought it was the same as me." And while the statement "We are both in love with boys" brings Fee and Big Eric together, significantly, it also drives a wedge of distinction between them. The reader is reminded that Fee's love for boys is acceptable because he, too, is an adolescent. Whereas Fee is a young person discovering his sexuality, Big Eric is a predator using the language of love to justify his actions.

Although Chee focuses on sexuality to discuss the complexities of Fee's development during formative years under the shadow of Big Eric, the young boy's racial formation is affected as well. Fee cannot understand his desires for Peter outside of the sexual abuse, especially given how both he and Big Eric are attracted to Peter's blond hair and features. That Peter is a shared object of desire helps establish the basis for Fee's belief that he and Big Eric are the same type of person, despite being aware that pedophilia and gayness are dissimilar. As discussed in the previous section about Moolsan-do island, the pain of losing Peter to suicide at age fifteen, and then Zach at age 17, causes Fee to carry intense survivor's guilt skewed by the shame of being gay. In combination with the fear that his desires for Peter make Fee a monster too, Peter is transformed into the ideal victim; by association, Fee, the gay child of Korean ancestry, excludes himself from being worthy of sympathy as one who was also sexually assaulted.

In the context of a very different type of camp, David L. Eng analyzes Lonny Kaneko's 1976 short story, *The Shoyu Kid*, to discuss the psychic processes within racial and sexual identifications for the nonwhite, queered child. Kaneko's story revolves around a group of Japanese American boys—Itchy, Jackson, and Masao—interned at Minidoka during World War II who entertain themselves by harassing a fellow interned boy, The Shoyu Kid—a nickname representing his outsider status among his peers. Eng argues that the molestation scene between the white US solider and The Shoyu Kid, witnessed by Itchy, is a "sodomitical" primal scene, which makes it impossible for the boys to access "normative identification with heterosexuality, whiteness, and Americanness" (*Racial Castration* 111). Interpreting Lacan's mirror stage through Kaja Silverman's theory of the self-same body and Freud's primal scene, Eng argues that for those who do not fit Lacan's idealized child model, their consciousness develops through

negotiation, rather than reflective identification. The racialized, sexualized, and queered child's sense of self, then, cannot align with cultural norms because "idealized images are available only to those whose bodily egos are somehow culturally authorized to see themselves within them" (*Racial Castration* 115) . For the boys in Kaneko's story, their reflections of themselves are racialized: they cannot escape being seen as Japanese American by the US nation-state coupled with being forced to see themselves as Japanese American through the conditions of the camp. The boys are constantly at odds, Eng argues, with the visuals that affirm dominant, white American masculinity and undermine their attempts to access it successfully.

Big Eric's molestation of Fee during the section leader's camping trip and later, the director's sexual abuse of Peter and the rest of Cabin 1 during the summer choir camp can be considered Fee's version of a sodomitical primal scene. When Big Eric chooses Peter, Fee is conflicted because he too desires Peter; but additionally, the director's preference for blond-haired, white boys also confirms for Fee that he is undesirable as a gay, half-Korean boy. Central to Eng's analysis of *The Shoyu Kid* is the argument that Itchy is unable to "become culturally validated in the image of whiteness thus manifests itself most insistently in this primal tableau through its intersecting failure with concomitant heterosexual ideal" (*Racial Castration* 130). Fee's relationship to his Koreanness is based in the stories told by his grandfather, which causes his lived experiences to be far more ambivalent and unstable. When the members of the Korean American Friendship Association of Maine visit Fee's parents' home for a kimchi-making party, Fee admits that "the other [Korean American] children frighten me a little" because he does not speak the language (Chee 9). Although not explained why, it was his Korean father's decision that Fee and his siblings only speak and read English; for Fee, the language barrier emphasizes his mixed race status. When a fellow choir boy asks if he is Chinese, Fee replies, "Korean. Half,"

reflecting that "Saying it always makes me feel split down the middle" (Chee 9-10). In contrast, Fee is repeatedly drawn to Peter's features; at their first meeting, Fee notes how Peter's hair is "white-blond…like candle flame" and how "Almost all of the boys are blond. Which is to say, I am the one who isn't" (Chee 9). Later, when Big Eric gives a solo to Peter despite how he is better suited, Fee admits: "But I see immediately then, what Big Eric wants. The blond hair at the top of the riser, imagine him singing" (Chee 12). Peter's whiteness, represented through his blond hair and blue eyes, is a key aspect of Fee's affection for him and a point of connection between himself and Big Eric.

The acts of watching and knowing are very important to Big Eric and Fee's relationship, consistently highlighting the ways in which their relationship is fundamentally imbalanced. Ultimately, Fee knows that he is "not the same" as Big Eric. Earlier in the novel, the two boys discuss the abuse and Fee thinks about his trip to the library and how he "looked up everything [he] could find on pedophilia and homosexuality. I knew Eric was a pedophile. I remember sitting in the aisle with the book, sure the librarian would find me. There in the card catalog were two neatly printed, plain-faced titles, Greek Homosexuality, Homosexuality in Ancient Greece" (Chee 32). Although he can name Eric as a pedophile, and knows that he is not one, Fee still cannot seem to fully separate his gay desires from the director's abusive power.

When Fee states, "I know what Big Eric watches, now, though, in me," the young boy names his gay desires; that is the thing that Eric observes. Fee's affection for other boys is something that both he and Big Eric are aware of; the young boy's sexual orientation is shared knowledge between them. Big Eric also watches Fee out of a need for identification. Big Eric wishes to conflate Fee's gayness with his own pedophilia and there are suggestions that Big Eric sees himself as a young boy in search of salvation. As an adult, Fee claims that Big Eric

"couldn't see that he was large and we [the choir boys] were not. His body to him felt outsized, a bear costume borrowed for a party, and then it vanished. In the moment he touched us, he was a boy again" (Chee 199). Stephen Hong Song argues that in this narrative moment, Chee is generously situating Big Eric's predatory behavior within a larger cycle of loss and abuse, the type "imbued with a kind of pain that spreads out in a metaphorical conflagration," and unfortunately, the ones most harmed are Fee and the other choir boys ("Burning" 258-9). Building from Sohn's claims, I contend that Big Eric also wants Fee's desires to mirror the adult's perversions. Eric even tries to shape Fee's knowledge of desire through the aforementioned book suggestions, about which Fee reflects: "Big Eric had urged me to go read this novel, and I checked it out from the library. When I got home with it, I realized why he wanted me to read it. The novel is about Alexander the Great, who has an affair with his older, adult teacher, when he is still a teenager" (Chee 48). Fee does not disclose whether he actually read the book or not. But when coupled with Fee's independent library trips, it's clear that the young boy is searching for ways to know himself. And although he describes his gayness as a knowledge that is a "light moving closer slowly through some faint dark," Fee's queerness is still under the gaze of Big Eric. The young boy's sexuality will continue to confuse him as long as he and Eric continue to present distorted and deceptive reflections back at one another.

Interestingly, Zach's initial question, "Did you know, before?" may not have pertained to the sexual abuse. The narrative does not make it clear whether Zach's question is about Big Eric, or about Fee's knowledge of his own gay desires at twelve-years-old. Later, as teenagers in high school, Zach is Fee's first sexual partner. Their relationship is based physical intimacy, lacking emotional connection or even true communication. Fee describes the nature of their relationship with detachment, stating: "Zach and I continue. What we continue, we don't know. We don't

ever talk about what we do, directly…I don't love him. He doesn't love me. Now we tear at each other more, for wanting not to want this. And afterward, as I look at his white thighs and brown arms, there's a real tenderness in knowing, whatever it is we want from each other, it seems always to be the same" (Chee 82). For Fee, the tenderness in knowing is based in avoidance, but also—the body: Zach's arms and legs. Rather than question how they treat each other, or the destructive foundation from which their desires extend, Fee chooses to take comfort in assuming they are both willing to use one another. Zach's question about Fee's knowledge returns later, at the end of the boys' high school careers. This time, however, the question is more direct. Fee narrates how the two "haven't spoken for most of the summer…It's over three years since [Big Eric's] trial, three months since we last had sex. And then a night shortly after [calling me one afternoon], [Zach] had driven over and asked me, Do you think I'm gay?" (Chee 88). In a defensive, yet dismissive response, Fee answers, "Nope. You are not like me." Perhaps he wants to protect Zach and can only see gayness as a source of harm. Or perhaps Fee understands, to a degree, the weight of his words on Zach: "As soon as I said it, everything about us became the past tense…When I said that [he isn't gay], I saw that he wouldn't be" (Chee 88). It is Fee who finds Zach after his suicide, which occurs the day after their conversation. His inability to truly hear Zach's questions, and his friend's tentative attempts to reach out and connect, heartbreakingly represents the limits and complexities of Fee's knowledge about sexuality when filtered through experiences of sexual abuse.

**Grandfather's Stories: Family Histories and Gay Desires**

The trip to Korea and Moolsan-do island that Fee takes with his paternal grandparents directly follows Zach's death. This narrative shift enables Chee to explicitly draw out Fee's struggles to understand how larger Korean diasporic histories of colonialism and Korean comfort

women could include a biracial and gay subject like himself. Even before the childhood sexual abuse reorients Fee's connections to his Korean great-aunts, one of the major barriers between Fee and his Koreanness, as mentioned earlier, is the fact that Fee does not speak the language. This is significant because the decision to only speak English was not Fee's, but made for him by his father. Perhaps his son's mixed race status and American mother are cause enough for English to be the most suitable language choice. Or perhaps it's due to an accident of birth, and living in the US simply means that English is Fee's first language. Or perhaps given Korea's history of Japanese colonialism, and how Fee's grandfather cannot speak Korean without first translating his thoughts from Japanese to Korean, the English language seems like a less complicated, less violent linguistic experience for Fee and his siblings. In the absence of a definitive reason why, Chee has created space enough for potential interpretations to include specifics related to Fee's familial and national histories, while still underscoring the nonbiological factors that potentially contribute to this decision. But given this chapter's focus on the effects of trauma on one's sense of self, I argue that Fee's inability to speak Korean indeed causes him a sense of alienation and loss. When praying at the family shrine on Moolsan-do, for instance, Fee hopes that "prayers can arrive translated," representing how, despite unquestioned biological, familial ties to the island and nation, Fee feels that his access is limited.

Due to his limitations, Fee must rely on his grandfather's stories, both the mythical and personal ones, to see himself within Korean history and as a part of Korean culture. The stories connect Fee to his Korean genealogy, despite the fact that Fee's biological ties are incredibly secure. The Zhe family is well-established on Moolsan-do island, and while traveling with his grandparents, strangers comment on how much Fee looks "like a Zhe" (Chee 91). When Fee is told stories about his great-aunts and his grandfather's life under colonialism, the advice is a

mixture of folk knowledge and history and reality: “My first language is Japanese, he tells me. English far away. But, okay. Be like a fox, he says. Okay” (Chee 2). Without direct access, the hard distinctions between the grandfather’s folk and personal stories seem less important to Fee’s sense of self. Moreover, for a queer subject like Fee, genealogical formations that adhere less to rigid strictures based on biology and heterosexual reproduction are more likely to incorporate, rather than exclude, Fee’s mixed race status and sexual orientation within larger Korean histories.

As it stands, the poetic comparison between Fee and his grandfather’s experiences, for the purpose of framing one traumatic act through the other, risks the conflation of the two distinct forms of violence. The ideologies that structured the grandfather’s experiences under colonialism – the loss of Korean language and culture; the use of education to further imperial rule – are glossed over and flattened by Fee’s more immediate reference to his sexual abuse: “Sometimes, right after he told me [to be like a fox], I would look at him and wonder what it felt like, to have the print of your enemy all the way inside you, right into the way you shaped your thoughts. But I know now” (Chee 2). The beginning of the anecdote is promising in its staging of intergenerational transmissions of knowledge: two family members grappling with Korean national histories of violence and personal family histories via stories passed down through generations. By the end of the passage, however, it becomes clear to the reader that the purpose of the comparative reference of having the “print of the enemy all the way inside you,” (the enemy being the Japanese and Big Eric, respectively) is meant to emphasize Fee’s aching and overwhelming sense of pain, rather than generate a deeper understanding of colonialism and abuse or public discourse about either.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that when given the chance, Fee narrates his family histories and gay desires as an intertwined series of origin tales similar to the Korean folklore stories told throughout his childhood by his father and grandfather. As Stephen Hong Song argues, "Chee's revision of the Lady Tamamo-no-ae tale…is intended to be a revolutionary form of love, one that crosses the boundaries of beings—certainly a queerish kind of desire—and challenges any blanket categorization of the fox-demon solely as a troublemaker and agent of destruction" ("Burning" 259). Sohn's analysis then claims that the fox-demon tales of Lady Tammamo "provides a template Fee will eventually follow," learning how to love without manipulating others in the process ("Burning" 259). But additionally, I want to consider the potential for the fox-demon tales to serve as an alternative genealogical model for someone like Fee. In the Prologue, before the childhood sexual abuse casts its shadow over the rest of the narrative, Fee imagines an alternative genealogy for himself:

> My hair is brown. But in my beard, the red threads grow. I shave them. My name is Aphias Zhe. Aphias was the name of a schoolteacher in Scotland five generations back on my mother's side. Zhe is the name every man in my father's family has been called by since that first day we fished the sea between Korean and Japan, five hundred years ago. Aphias became Fee in the mouth of my friend Peter, and Fee became Fiji in college. But Fee is the name that stuck, because Peter gave it to me. (Chee 3)

This potential, if not preferred, genealogy is powerful for how it represents Fee as his whole biracial and gay self, bringing together the interracial heterosexual pairing of his Scottish-American and Korean parents and the queer imagining of Peter as his lover. In this version, Fee's

lineage, race, sexuality, and histories of colonialism are generative and constitutive, rather than sources of loss and pain, exclusively.

The result of the sexual abuse and the construction of Peter as an ideal victim, however, cause Fee to experience racialized and familial losses. As discussed in the previous section, the trauma reframes how Fee understands his family histories. The stories about his Korean aunts and their sexual traumas have the potential to help Fee rethink race and gender, especially considering how these stories are passed down by his grandfather. But Fee's traumatic narrative can only reference the aunts through a narrow definition of sexual vulnerability, which is reinforced by Fee's construction of Peter as a normative child and an innocent victim worthy of sympathy. When Fee's melancholia causes him to modify his grandfather's stories until the representations of his Korean aunts are able to fit within his memories of Peter, then his family histories become inaccessible to Fee.

For Fee, the significant sentiment that connects himself with his grandfather is how they are both living with the loss of loved ones. But the grandfather's stories also offer an opportunity for Fee to reconfigure intergenerational ties through queer and normative desires, as demonstrated through his alternative genealogical model. Likewise, Fee's experiences of sexual abuse could help configure a model for understanding his grandfather's experiences with colonialism based on comparable corporeal experiences of trauma, outside the strictures of family history or linear temporality. These conditions of possibility emphasize that as a gay child with mixed race ancestry, there are potentials for Fee to imagine his body otherwise, in a manner more similar to the alternative genealogy of how he received the name *Fee*.

**Sexual Histories and Queer/ing Genealogies**

New genealogies emerge from the passing of Speck and Freddy Moran, offering Fee access to kinships that are not biologically determined. The deaths of Speck and Freddy Moran occur as Fee is moving back east from California. For Fee to lose a person dear to him and a former fellow choir member, respectively, is consistent with the deaths of loved ones that Fee has experienced during childhood. But these deaths are significant not for their repetition of loss, but for how they offer new opportunities for alternative kinship models not previously available to Fee. These kinship models represent a horizon of possibility, one where Fee might make loss productive and learn how to cultivate and participate in intimacies—despite his traumatic experiences—with others. Such relationships would challenge Fee's preconceived notion that he is a monster, incapable of escaping Big Eric's shadow.

When Fee attends Speck's funeral, he realizes that most of the attendees are also former research assistants:

> The moderately sized room is full of men and young men of descending orders of age. A familiar reserve, the articulate quiet I learned from Speck, makes the room familiar, and then of course we resemble each other: dark haired, pale, clean-cut but rumpled from reading and bad lighting…Looking at his urn we look to our future. We smile at each other some and trickle out after paying our respects to this last quiet with Speck. No one asks if there are any heirs, as we all know there aren't. (Chee 177-8)

This collective of men, gathered to pay their respects to their teacher and mentor, create community and potential kinships that Fee can describe, but cannot quite access or experience fully. He can describe how they are connected, how Speck's influence makes the room familiar,

and that their bookish dispositions are similar enough to create a shared likeness between them. But Fee is short-sighted about the potential for intergenerational models, despite how the room consists of men of different ages, and that he fits within these relational structures. Then, when Fee declares, "we all know there aren't [any heirs]," and that those who came to show their respects are "Bachelors all," he forecloses the possibility of nonbiological kinships, even as the men and Fee create a genealogy of intergenerational male intimacies. Fee cannot imagine that those in the room are Speck's heirs, his progeny through research and mentorship, or perhaps these men have things that could be passed down to future generations. For Fee, the idea of a network made possible by Speck is not possible when his understanding of kinship is implicitly defined by heterosexuality and biological hereditary and his conceptions about an intimate relationship between an older man and a younger man are rooted in experiences of abuse and exploitation.

But despite how Fee may not be aware of the queer kinship available, the collective of research assistants represents a new model of connection with the potential for Fee to heal and thrive, rather than suffer. As Fee stands in a room with other men who are all connected by single, male figure, readers are reminded of the Pine State Boys Chorus. At the first rehearsal, Fee similarly observes what connects the fellow boys to one another and himself: "Some boys I recognize from my town, the others are unfamiliar […] Almost all of these boys are blond. Which is to say, I am the one who isn't" (Chee 9). Fee implicitly understands how they have been brought together by Big Eric, and in the early stages of introductions, he wonders how they will connect beyond singing. What ultimately brings them together, sadly, is a bond based on their shared traumatic experiences and throughout the novel, this is the dominant framework through which Fee understands male intimacy as he struggles to fight the cycles of loss and

mourning that stem from Big Eric's abuse and Peter and Zach's suicides. But the potential kinship available via the research assistants could provide Fee a way of connecting through loss in generative ways, providing Fee with alternative understandings of loss. For instance, the idea that loss can bring people together, could possibly help Fee imagine relationships differently, even those with his former choir mates, such as Freddy Moran.

During the same visit in which Fee travels from Massachusetts to Maine to pay his respects to Speck, he also visits Freddy Moran, a former choir friend who has HIV/AIDS. Freddy and Fee are connected as survivors of childhood abuse, but Freddy's disease also connects the two men in a broader sociohistorical network; they are a part of a larger gay community who are losing their loved ones to AIDS during the 1990s. During his first visit with Freddy in the hospital, Fee describes him as "a tiny map of himself" and how his present friend's appearance causes Fee to remember another "friend telling me how either his meds or his virus caused his face to hollow as it went for the fat under his skin" (Chee 181). It's unclear whether the third, unnamed friend is referencing Freddy's hollow face, or another gay man living with AIDS. The ambiguity of the phrasing allows the reader to imagine how Freddy represents a multiplicity, extending to a growing population of individuals who are suffering. The significance of this particular hospital visit is that it references a larger queer community dealing with death and loss.

Freddy and Fee are a part of a generation of gay men affected by HIV/AIDS at the end of the twentieth century, but perhaps most importantly, the experience of visiting Freddy connects he and Fee in a network that is completely separate from Big Eric. Fee later indirectly reveals that Freddy's was not the first hospital room he has visited; indeed, there were other friends and acquaintances with the disease while he lived in San Francisco, and later, New York City. The loss that Fee experiences as a gay adult man is distinct from his experiences as a queer child,

even if he cannot articulate the nuances between the two. For Fee, loss simply begets loss. As a result of regularly visiting with Freddy, for instance, Fee thinks of stories he knows about other men with HIV/AIDS, how one "found out he was positive and shot himself in the head," and another who "found out his status when he collapsed from walking pneumonia, and died a few days later" (Chee 189). Stories and third person accounts return again when Fee hears about Freddy's passing: "Back in San Francisco, I remember how a friend of mine once went out and broke every window he could find when his boyfriend died. He walked street to street through the empty shopping distinct and left behind blocks of broken glass. He wasn't caught. And the next day the papers couldn't explain it. And it never happened again" (Chee 192). These scenes are particularly heartbreaking and capture the range of emotions and types of mourning experienced by the gay community, but Fee does not—potentially cannot—speculate as to their significance. Because even as Freddy's illness reminds him of men that Fee knew before, there are limits to Fee's associative thinking. Although Freddy doesn't speak due to his virus-induced dementia, Fee is told that he "sometimes sings" and admits, "I don't know what I'd do, if he started singing" (Chee 189). In other words, there is a degree to which Freddy will always be the young choir boy, the sexual assault victim, whose actions led to Big Eric's arrest. If Fee cannot help but be reminded of Freddy as an adolescent even when he is so clearly a grown man, there is a likely chance Fee understands himself similarly.

Comparable to his experiences with the Speck's research assistants, Fee does not explicitly imagine himself as a part of a community or kinship network. While describing his time in San Francisco, Fee almost seems compelled to insist that "With the exception of the occasional political demonstration, I lived quietly, and was relatively solitary, avoiding the Castro as well as the Mission, and the bars of SOMA" (Chee 172). Perhaps this is an extension

of his behavior while in college when Fee would resist accountability and blame his friends' call outs on his preference for blond-haired objects of attraction as the reason behind his aversion to politics (Chee 107). But the sociohistorical context of Freddy's death within the gay community, reiterated by the stories Fee cites, provides a different sense of Fee as a historical subject, regardless of his apolitical and unreliable narration. As Sohn argues, "Freddy's death calls attention to the problematic nature of social exclusions that emerge in light of infectious diseases […] The lack of support that Freddy's mother receives in light of her son's condition is never fully explained in the novel, but nevertheless recalls the hysteria and fear that first erupted during the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic" ("Burning" 265). Fee, it seems, can only see the destructive aspects of the disease: the suicide by gun, the sudden collapse and death, the public display of grief by vandalizing public property and this limited perspective closes him off from seeing how kinship is built in spite of—and sometimes, because of, the loss and deaths.

Whereas the kinship between the research assistants has the potential for connections to be shared across generations, the kinship between Fee and Freddy (and others like it) extends horizontally, turning gay men into a generation of individuals experiencing HIV/AIDS and its effects collectively. Through structures of support, this kinship offers a chance to understand loss as more than solely destructive, but generative for the ways it encourages a politics of caretaking. Fee's emotional labor is most explicitly expressed through the regularity of his visits and the stories he recites to himself about others with the disease, but he also brings flowers to Freddy's hospital room, helps make sure he's comfortable and checks his vital signs (Chee 189). Even without the stories, these acts of caretaking reiterate how this is not the first bedside Fee has visited, that he's experienced in caring for the sick, or at least has watched others care for their dying loved ones. By passing on skills that he's learned from others, Fee brings Freddy into an

affective network of care built on shared loss – even between individuals who may never meet – ensuring that Freddy is not alone with the disease. Fee's narration often undermines the impact of his visits, but Freddy's mother understands their significance, telling him "Thank you for being there for him at the end. I know he knew. I just know it" (Chee 192). When the simple act of being there has the power to fight, what Sohn described as the exclusion and fear associated with HIV/AIDS in the 1990s, then Fee's caretaking has the potential to be transformative, to the extent that Freddy and Fee have more in common than the shared traumas of their childhood. This new kinship between Freddy and Fee is fragile, and importantly, is only made possible through Bridey. As a community collectively experiencing the disease and its devastating effects, a network of support requires individuals like Bridey to help take care of Fee while Fee takes care of Freddy. Furthermore, it is Bridey who reads the letter aloud to Fee, the one in which Fee's mother first breaks the news of Freddy's health status (Chee 175); and it's Bridey who sometimes accompanies Fee to the biweekly visits so he does not have to go alone (Chee 190); and it's Bridey who gently encourages Fee to broaden his ideas of living and dying as Freddy lies in his hospital bed (Chee 191). This structure of caretaking between gay men, in response to but also because of the shared loss caused by HIV/AIDS, suggests that Fee already lives with loss and can foster intimacy with other men, even if he doesn't have the words to describe it. These queer kinships, even when he cannot fully grasp their potential or how he to access them, represent how Fee the gay adult differs from Fee the queer child, presenting a horizon of possibility for how Fee might one day see himself in which he fully accepts the burden of queerness that Edelman encourages.

The beginning of the fourth section, *Blue*, Chee explicitly depicts Fee's liminal space in his development when he has options. Although he is still melancholic, Fee's narrative as a gay

adult has more space, is more open to the possibility of options, than his childhood narratives. In contrast to how he felt as a teen and college, Fee explains "I no longer spent all my time wanting to die, but I was fairly apprehensive about being alive. It wasn't that my life lacked meaning, but rather that I disliked the meaning it offered to me every morning as I sat at my studio wheel, spinning" (Chee 172). Expressions of feeling lost and adrift still linger throughout Fee's narration, and he continues to inhabit a passive relationship to being alive. But Fee also seems to have negotiated a deal with existence: as long as he could find ways to lessen the burden of still being alive, he would continue forward. In reference to his pottery business that provided his living in San Francisco, Fee acknowledges: "I was not making great art, but I didn't want to, either. I wanted to make lots of things that added little beauties everywhere, on a daily basis. This seemed to me better. I'd had enough of great art, I had decided, through music" (Chee 172). Over time, Fee has learned to persist by turning his coping mechanisms into an approach to life and a career, but still remains an unreliable narrator rooted in his trauma and loss.

**Resisting Warden: Confronting Power within Sexual Relations**

Right before Fee narrates his relationship with Warden, the point where Fee gives into the teenaged boy's infatuations, the narration shifts the point-of-view and reads as though Fee is talking to himself. It begins with the statement "Chronotope: an intersection of time and place" and then states directly: "You decide, I want to remember this or that, and so the part of you that faces the future is now like a dragon flying over the sea…An angel it seems, but, really, what you make is a golem out of your own life , and then you ask it a question, you say, Speak to me. Tell me what I did. How did I get here?" (Chee 194-5) Rather than present Fee as one without choices, his narration forces us to confront the fact that by "Blue," Fee is no longer a child. Fee

cannot deny the power imbalance within his relationship with Warden, no matter how exceptional the circumstances.

When Fee leaves Warden at the hotel, his departure from that relationship is his way of refusing to become someone like Big Eric. And by acknowledging that he and Big Eric are not the same, this allows Fee to begin to let Peter go. Fee attempts to release his object of desire. But what remains unclear is whether Fee recognizes how Big Eric's abuse altered how Fee thinks of race and sexuality and the worthy victim. Until Fee is able to unlearn how he had turned Peter into the ideal victim, which allowed him to see his Korean aunts as children (not Korean girls), then saying good bye to Peter as an object of desire from the past risks imagining that he's found some peace with regards to his Korean aunts. This is concerning because within the narrative, Fee has yet to do any work to actually understand the historical, colonial circumstances of Korean comfort women.

To some degree, Fee understands that he can no longer hold onto the stories of his Korean aunts as children, girls. In the beginning of "Blue," Fee imagines his aunts otherwise, no longer confined by the stories of his childhood as told by his grandfather:

> Sometimes I imagine my grand-aunts. Escaped from their tormentors, unable to go home…Could they be out there, somehow unable to have found their way home? Sometimes I see them: old women, vigorous as teenagers, stepping across the night in the rush of wind, their hair turning to fire…We love him, they would say of their brother, their words scattering across the roof of sky. We miss him, but we can't come home. (Chee 171)

When Fee describes his great-aunts through his perception of his grandfather's experiences of loss, Fee predominantly saw them as young girls "who used to run along the beach tossing [his

grandfather as a boy] back and forth between them" (Chee 2). But to see his aunts as old women grants them a futurity and a release.

**Conclusion: A Queer, Feminist Korean American Diaspora**

Through Fee, *Edinburgh* depicts how child's emergence as a sexualized being, when informed by gay desires and sexual trauma, creates a deeply ambivalent and contradictory sense of self. Chee's writing does not try to create narrative distance between Fee's gayness and his abuse, refusing to disentangle the two and otherwise insulate and protect Fee's gay desires from any associative connection to Big Eric's pedophilia. Furthermore, that which queers Fee is not solely about how he's been sexualized, but the racialized and familial losses he experiences as a result of desire and abuse. Fee's experiences with sexuality and trauma make a strong case for asserting family histories and lineage are not guarantees in determining who we are or how we exist in the world.

Fee's construction of Peter as the ideal child victim worthy of protection and sympathy is based on a version of childhood sexuality that defines innocence through whiteness. Throughout Fee's his childhood and into his twenties, as long as he blames himself for Big Eric's actions and his friends' suicides, Fee cannot escape his melancholia. This means that Fee's traumatized perspective causes him to see his Korean aunts as innocents, like Peter and Zach, which cuts Fee off from his own family histories. And although alternative kinships are later made available to Fee because of his experiences of being gay, Fee cannot see the potential for connection through loss when the childhood sexual abuse to crowds out other traumas.

When Fee imagines his Korean aunts as "old women, vigorous as teenagers," he is releasing them from his limited, traumatized perspective. For Fee to think of his Korean aunts only as young girls perpetuates an inaccurate conflation of his aunts' experiences as Korean

comfort women and his friends' experiences with pedophilia. When Fee enfolded his grandfather's stories into his own struggles to cope with the sexual abuse and his friends' deaths, Fee wasn't giving his Korean aunts any sense of agency or voice. But when Fee uses the Lady Tammamo folklore as a template for narrating his own family histories and gay desires ("Aphias became Fee in the mouth of my friend Peter"), the novel expresses the potential for race, sexuality, and traumatic family histories to be productive for one's sense of self. Chee gestures toward extending this template to the Korean aunts when Fee imagines them as old women, "their hair turning to fire" who say that they love their brother, but they can't come home. The fire references how Lady Tammamo, in an act of love and devotion, chooses to die in her husband's funeral pyre. I contend that queer, interracial genealogies are meaningful templates for healing and survival if they are also feminist. Imagining otherwise is most powerful when those who have been silenced are giving a opportunity to have a voice on their own terms.

# CONCLUSION

In *"We are Here Because You were There": Kinship and Loss in 20th- and 21st-Century Korean American Narratives*, I have put forward three figures—the Korean comfort woman, the transnational Korean adoptee, and the Korean American mixed race child—to analyze the formation of families and representations of alternative kinships within the Korean diaspora during the Cold War era. Although the texts and films featured in the dissertation are familiar to scholars of Asian American studies, transnational adoption studies, and American studies, this study is the first to discuss them collectively as an Asian American literary project that focuses exclusively on contemporary Korean American cultural texts and displacement in the aftermaths of World War II and the Korean War. Scholars of the Cold War era have established how the American nuclear family and its attendant norms regarding whiteness, patriarchy, and heterosexuality was the dominant kinship model for securing national belonging. I contend that an examination of the conditions of militarization and migrations associated with these three diasporic figures reveals how the American nuclear family model was also applied to subjects within the Korean diaspora. Using queer and feminist approaches to understand the significance of Korean transnational subjects' incorporation into American nuclear formations, I argue, makes legible how the Asian diasporic family is produced from queer *and* normative kinships within the diaspora.

In each chapter, I have examined narrative representations of family as a space that uses the figure of the Korean comfort woman, the transnational adoptee, and/or the mixed race child to discipline nonnormative sexualities, nonreproductive sexual practices, histories of sexual violence, and racial differences, while simultaneously pushing evidence of queer desires and nonbiological kinships to the edges of the family romance. As a figure that foregrounds the

formation of families through non-biological means, the transnational adoptee is particularly generative for a study of queerness within the Asian diasporic family. The adoptee's incorporation into American families is predicated on the template of the Korean orphan. The idea that adopted children needed saving because they lacked families and a suitable home country that could provide for them were sufficient reasons for bringing Korean children en masse to the United States since the end of the Korean War.[34] For Deann Borshay Liem (chapter one) not only was the story of being an orphan untrue, but she arrived in the United States under a falsified identity. Rather than pinpoint a source of blame, my analyses are invested in tracing the US liberal narrative that Borshay Liem is better off, or "lucky," to have been adopted. I examine how her adoption narratives, once questioned, expose the gendered, transnational logics of the rescue trope. The space of the family, thus, masks the violence that rescue missions, in this case, transnational adoption practices, enact. Like the adoptee, the other diasporic Korean figures in my project are intimately linked to forms of kinship forged from non-biological, often traumatic origins. These Korean American cultural texts collectively reveal that Korean diasporic families, featuring military war brides and transnational Korean adoptees, are particularly useful for understanding US ideologies of race and nationalism through the transnational flows of the Cold War era, including American postwar global expansion and military dominance.

The focus on Korean diasporic histories involving the US and the figures produced from conditions of war and militarization, as opposed to a literary project that analyses a wider, more representative range of "Asian American" texts, allowed for a deeper consideration of family formations involving Asian subjects and white American subjects. I argue that the Asian

[34] Due to inconsistent practices regarding record-keeping, transnational adoption scholars acknowledge the difficulty in accurately assessing the numbers of Korean children adopted transnationally. According to historian Arissa Oh's 2015 estimates, "Between the Korean War and end of the century, Americans adopted approximately two-thirds of the 150,000 children that Korea sent overseas for adoption" (2). Although transnational Korean adoption has decreased in the twenty-first century, the practices are ongoing.

diasporic family has emerged as an overlooked kinship formation within Asian American studies and American studies. In *The Feeling of Kinship*, David L. Eng asks a series of questions regarding the figure of the transnational adoptee and whether certain identities are available to her. Among the inquiries about whether the adoptee is an immigrant and/or Asian American, Eng ponders: "Even more, is her adoptive family Asian American?" (94). Following Eng's question, this project investigates the terms by which scholars in Asian American studies define families with Asian members. A.J. Yumi Lee argues that Asian diasporic family formations involving the Korean military war bride and the transnational Korean adoptee are "invisible and incomprehensible according to our dominate narratives of the immigrant and the refugee" (141). Building from that insight, I argue that the Asian diasporic family involving Korean immigrant women and US soldiers is not often considered Korean American.

Asian diasporic family formations have the potential to broaden discussions in Asian American studies about interracial families. I argue that the nuclear family with a Korean immigrant mother, a US white father, and mixed race child *is* a Korean American family, but has historically not been characterized as such because of how whiteness and state-sanctioned policies are embedded in its formation. Further, the existing scholarly tendency to historicize the US policy of "family reunification" through the 1965 Immigration Act is unhelpful in the case of the Korean diaspora because it risks obscuring interracial family formations that emerged earlier as a result of the US military presence in Korea in the 1950s.

The queerness of the Asian diasporic family, as analyzed in the project, also offers potentially new discussions for queer studies scholars interested in analyzing the American nuclear family. The Asian diasporic families within the project are products of the decades following WWII and reflect the postwar American culture that Christina Klein analyzes in *Cold*

*War Orientalism*. Building further on Cathy J. Cohen's racialization of heteronormativity, my analysis of Asian diasporic family formations points to the need to consider further what is queer about the American nuclear family, in conversation with works by scholars such as J. Halberstam, Elizabeth Freeman, and Lauren Berlant, and particularly when framed within transnational contexts.

My analyses foreground the stories told about Korean diasporic families, and their transnational members, within the selected texts and films of the dissertation, which reference histories of trauma involving colonial Korea, postcolonial Korea, and the United States' ongoing involvement in a post-1945 South Korean nation. The origins of this project began with the questions about the figure of the transnational adoptee and the adopted child's relationship with their American family. I wanted to understand how familial love could motivate, at times justify, and otherwise obscure the US colonialist logics that structure transnational adoption practices. Through my research, I realized how important narrative form is for understanding transnational adoption: stories told *to* the adoptee by their adopted families about how they came to the US for the sole purpose of joining a family of strangers turned kin through state-sanctioned practices. This project took seriously the idea put forth by Ann Cvetkovich that immigration can queer its subjects and consequently, the family is the site from which new social formations and political possibilities could form. She further suggests that "Both the fantasy of return to an origin and the desire to assimilate can be strategies for forgetting the trauma of dislocation" (*Archive of Feelings* 122). Building on Lisa Lowe's assertion that personal stories are social histories, Cvetkovich believes that stories also articulate historical trauma and are key in building a framework for migration and diaspora "that doesn't just demand assimilation, normalization, or stable and singular homes" (*Archive of Feelings* 124).

In the texts discussed in this study, the motivation to seek the alternative kinships discussed often emerges from the restrictions, misalignments, and excesses created by normative models of the nuclear family. The transnational Korean subject who was once exclusively figured as the Korean comfort woman, the transnational adoptee, or the mixed race child may identify the "queer" aspects that helped produce their Asian diasporic family formations and then locate similar kinships outside the confines of the family. These alternative social relations, formed through feminist praxes (chapter one), lesbian desires (chapter two), nonnormative gender play (chapter three), and nonreproductive genealogical practices (chapter four) each offer opportunities for the Korean transnational subject to see themselves in the context of new networks and affiliations.

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